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ENGL 112B  
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## Underrepresentation of Fantasy Beings in Literature

### **Rationale**

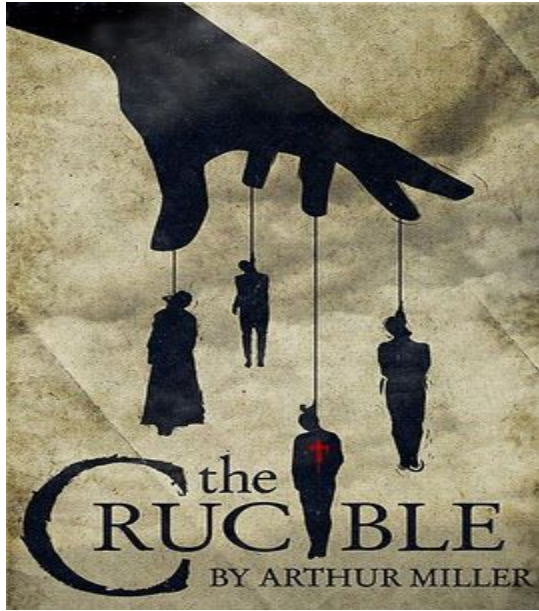
Back in my days of being a grade school student, I was never interested in fantasy novels. I remember a time when everybody in my elementary school classes were reading acclaimed fantasy books, such as *Harry Potter*, *Eragon*, *The Magic Tree House*, etc. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't get myself interested in these types of books. There was a time when I sat down and tried to read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* but I stopped about halfway through because it wouldn't spark my interest and instead just felt like a plot being stretched out far too long with little excitement to look forward to. Throughout the rest of my years in school, I stuck to mostly comedic or nonfiction readings; some of my favorite books from my younger days were *Bridge to Terabithia*, *The Fudge and Peter Hatcher Tales*, and anything written by Beverly Cleary. When I reached my middle school years, I began to change my mind about fantasy books and became an avid fan of *The Twilight Saga*. However, it was not long before I grew out of this series, as the books are very poorly written and the messages they convey are ludicrous to say the least. It wasn't until I enrolled in college that I discovered how fantasy books truly are a gem to the world of literature.

When taking the Young Adult Literature class at San Jose State University, I came to realize how fantasy novels mean so much more than only following characters who either have magical powers or are transported into magical lands where anything is possible; these stories and characters have a lot to say about reality, as Ursula K. Le Guin states "For fantasy is true of

course. It isn't factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know that... They know that its truth challenges, even threatens all that is false, phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living" (Le Guin, 2019). In other words, fantasy novels act as a satire critiquing all hardships and issues people experience in reality.

While doing my observations for this unit of study, I observed an English class consisting of high school juniors reading Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, a historical play centered on the Salem Witch Trials of the early 1690's and those who were accused of practicing witchcraft. Rashada Melendez, the teacher, introduced the play by explaining it is about more than just witches and represents how difficult it is for those who are considered lower-class to be treated fairly by others. I remember reading *The Crucible* when I was a junior but my teacher never went on to explain how the text represents lower-class struggles. When I become a teacher someday, I hope to teach this text and help my students learn how even though the characters they read about in fantasy novels may not exist in reality, the issues they experience are very pertinent to what many people face regularly on the daily; therefore, my unit of study will focus on magical/fantasy beings and how they are often underrepresented in their stories.

### **Introducing the Lesson**



**The Centerpiece** (<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/324751823102196018/>)

While not all students might enjoy reading, many of them enjoy listening to music. At the beginning of a class session, I would play Lana Del Rey’s cover of the song *Season of the Witch*. While listening to the song, I would ask my students to jot down notes on a sheet of paper, identifying some of the concepts about witches heard in the song, such as the instance where a cat is meant to be watching you (witches are presumed to have a feline companion in various depictions) or how the narrator warns to “pick up every stitch” (stitching being an activity witches are believed to participate in frequently). At the end of the day, I assign my students a homework assignment of writing a one-page report in which they must try to come up with as many characterizations of witches they possibly can. I do not make any specific requirements for the characterizations; I just want my students to think hard and evaluate what they think makes a person a witch.

The following day, the students will come to class with their one-page report and we would have a discussion about their assignment. I would call on students randomly and ask them

to share what they wrote for homework. As more and more students share, I copy their ideas on to the whiteboard or a Google Doc projection. When each student has shared at least one idea, I explain to the class how witches are not always meant to be depicted as people who have magical powers, but instead are sometimes targeted because they are different for negative reasons. I ask the students if they have ever heard of the Salem Witch Trials and explain to them how this was a time where multiple women were accused of witchcraft, but it was often because they were considered to be a negative portrayal of what women were supposed to be like during this era. Many of them were alcoholics, homeless, minority race, and some were even attacked due to their enjoyment of reading; women were often belittled for enjoying literature and other academic pursuits at this point in time. After we have completed our discussion of the homework, I introduce *The Crucible* as our in-class reading. Since it is a play, the students would not enjoy it nearly as much if they had to read it by themselves, but since we don't have a lot of time to read the whole book in class together, I inform the students of a free audiobook on YouTube they can listen to when I assign certain parts of the play for homework.

We will spend the next few class periods reading parts of *The Crucible*. I assign all students a particular role for them to read aloud and do a Reader's Theatre activity where the students will sit at the front of the class, read their parts for the act they have been assigned, and then alternate with somebody else who has the same part. Whatever scenes we don't read in class, I have the students listen to the audiobook for homework. Throughout our time of reading the play, I ask the students to make a list of every character who is accused of witchcraft at one point or another throughout the plot. For every character selected, I tell the students to write a character description with quotes pulled from the text to concretely support their points. By the

time we have finished the play, I have the students turn in their character descriptions for participation credit and we designate an entire class period to discuss what are some key characteristics per each character accused of witchcraft. The answers I would hope to see would be:

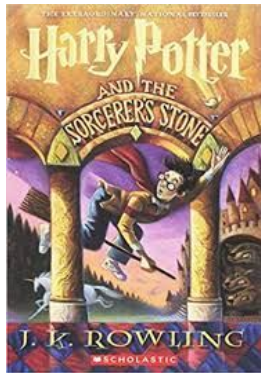
- Tituba-slave from Barbados, performs “black magic.”
- Martha Corey-woman who loves to read, her husband accuses her of witchcraft because of this.
- Rebecca Nurse-religious woman, also very caring towards others.
- Goody Osborn & Goody Good- two homeless women, alcoholics, everybody believes they are witches because of their social standing.

By examining these various characters, I would want my students to understand how all of these women had something in common: they all had parts to them which others deemed unusual or inappropriate, so they were classified as lower-class/underrepresented individuals.

After we have completed reading *The Crucible* as a class, I introduce the students to a project they will be working on which will likely take up the remainder of the semester and act as their final “exam.” Using the inspiration I garnered from “Workshopping the Canon and No More Fake Reading: Two Recent Approaches to Combining Classics with YA Literature” by Diane Scrofano, published on Dr. Bickmore’s *YA Wednesday* blog, I explain to my class they will be doing some out of class readings which will accumulate to an assignment given towards the end of the semester. Scrofano claims in her article pairing contemporary YA literature novels with canonical novels will allow students to learn more about the topics and themes associated with the canonical text (Scrofano, 2019). This is a very wise strategy that would encourage

students to explore beyond what they are learning in class. While I will be assigning contemporary texts for my students to read, I will also be assigning some more canonical texts so they may have an opportunity to learn about witches and fantasy beings through a variety of perspectives.

### Out of Class Readings



<https://www.amazon.com/Harry-Potter-Sorcerers-Stone-Rowling/dp/059035342X>

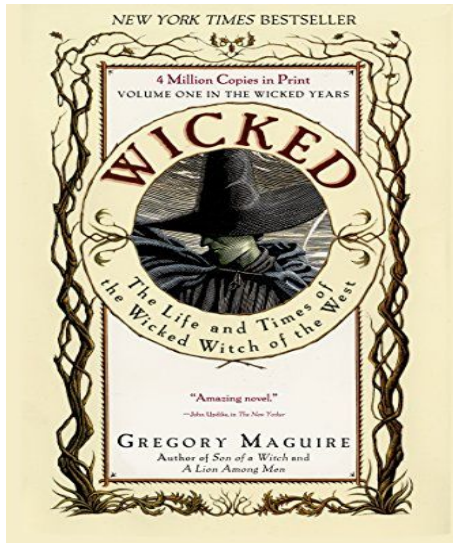
The first book I would have my students read would be *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. In order to make sure they are keeping up with the reading, I would begin class with brief SSW style journal entries related to the components of YA literature studied in *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, such as “what are some of the archetypes Harry and other characters in the novel connect with?” or “What common themes do we find in this *Harry Potter* novel or any of the following ones?” I would look for answers of Harry being an orphan, mistreatment brought upon by his relatives and classmates, trouble fitting in with a world you are unfamiliar with, etc. My goal is to have my students learn how even though Harry is considered to be one of the most powerful wizards in all of the wizarding world, he still constantly fights to be respected by the relatives he lives with when he is not at school, is bullied and degraded by Malfoy and his

cohorts for having so much power, and continues to fight for respect from everyone even as the series progresses past the first novel. Harry is a renowned wizard in the wizarding world, but still finds himself underrepresented as he struggles to find a place to belong in both the muggle and wizarding world.



<https://www.thoughtco.com/the-witches-in-macbeth-2985023>

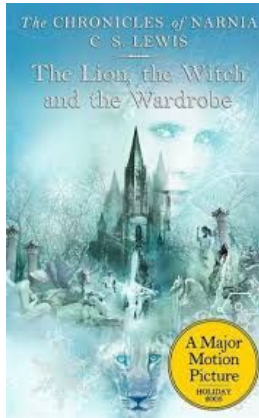
To incorporate some more canonical work and a close look at poetry, I would provide my students with handouts of the Witches' monologues from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Similar to a "Book to Film" study, I would have my students watch the Witches' scenes in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2010 stage production of *Macbeth*. I would have them do a journal entry at the beginning of class to describe how the Witches are portrayed in this film version. In the play itself, the witches are intended to be hags, crones, or just any type of unpleasant, elderly women. In the 2010 film, they are portrayed as war nurses who tend to the soldiers when they have been injured at battle. I want my students to come to the conclusion of how the Witches are meant to be portrayed as either repulsive beings or subservient assistants; these traits are often linked to those who are outcasted or rejected by those surrounding them, so the Witches in *Macbeth* would too fall underrepresented classes in reality.



<https://www.amazon.com/Wicked-Life-Times-Witch-Years-ebook/dp/B000FC14JY>

Another novel I would have my students read would be *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* by Gregory Maguire. This book acts as a prequel to L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and follows the story of green-skinned, Elphaba, who later becomes the infamous Wicked Witch of the West. As a homework assignment, I would have my students pull out quotes from the novel which characterize Elphaba and have them share their ideas aloud in class on the due date. My students would come to learn how Elphaba was severely mistreated by her peers due to the color of her skin (similar to Tituba), shunned by her father for her mother's attempts to ensure her second child was not green, and only becomes the Wicked Witch of the West because of everyone continuing to misunderstand her knowledge and power. Just like in the *Harry Potter* series, Elphaba is a smart, powerful being, but due to the attitudes of the people around her, she is cast aside and seen as an atrocity. With these negative characterizations, Elphaba too falls under the category of an underrepresented fantasy being.





<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/lion-the-witch-and-the-wardrobe-c-s-lewis/1100182094#/>

Another out of class reading I would assign my students would be *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis. This book follows the four Pevensie children as they attempt to help free the magical land of Narnia from the ruling of the White Witch. While my students are reading this book, I would have them come to class and do journal entries on characterizations of the White Witch. The students should be able to identify how the White Witch is cruel, malicious, dictatorial, and uses her power for her own benefit instead of altruism. While the White Witch is of high power in the novel, I aim to teach my students how her mal-intentions worsen her representation of fantasy beings instead of bettering them. The White Witch turns others to stone out of pure rage, takes the life of Aslan, a benevolent leader in Narnia, and puts four children in grave danger throughout the entire novel. My goal is to show my students how even though some fantasy characters have great power, they abuse it and choose to only practice it to get what they want. Since the White Witch is a villain all around, she too is an underrepresented fantasy being because she makes witches and other fantasy beings seem cruel and villainous.

### **Extra Activity**

In order to show my students the various representations of witches and fantasy beings, I would ask them to do a separate activity alongside the out of class readings. I would ask my students to watch a couple episodes of *American Horror Story: Coven*, a television season which centers entirely on a coven of witches and an opposing voodoo clan. During class, I would assign the episodes I want my students to watch: “The Replacements” and “Fearful Pranks Ensue.” These episodes feature strong representation of voodoo and how it is practiced. On a side note, the character of Marie Laveau, played by Angela Bassett, is based off of a real character who is believed to have been a strong practitioner of voodoo, giving the show a more historical insight to the practice of voodoo. When my students watch the episodes, I ask them to write a two page report on how voodoo is represented in the show. In the assigned episodes, the voodoo characters often feel threatened by racist actions inflicted by white people. The voodoos are made up of the African community of New Orleans, so they experience racial prejudice frequently. The learning objective I wish for my students to see is how a certain type of magic/witchcraft is underrepresented because of racial tension; a long, unfortunate history regarding the practice of voodoo and its followers. My students should learn from this assignment how race can contribute to the underrepresentation of a particular fantasy being or community.

### **Final Project**

At the end of the semester, I would assign the students a take-home final where they write a five page essay in which they evaluate the various types of portrayals of witches and other fantasy beings from all the readings they read this semester. The students should aim to elaborate on how the various depictions of fantasy characters all correspond to underrepresentation in some way, whether it be isolation from your surrounding people to using

your power for the wrong purposes. On the last day of class for the semester, I ask my students to do a brief presentation of the evaluations they wrote, which would contribute to their participation grade. After each student has shared their ideas for the essay, we have a discussion as a whole class reflecting on what we learned from our lesson on *The Crucible* and how it paints a bigger picture of the world we live in: not everybody is created exactly the same as everybody else, so others will try to use these differences to make someone out to be a lesser representative of what others deem right/acceptable. When I become a teacher, I hope to implement real life lessons in all of my teaching, so I would hope to a lesson like this would help my students learn how even slight differences can lead to people being ostracized and detested.

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