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Dr. Warner

English 112B

Unit of Study

Self Discovery Through Fantasy, Our Adventure in Wonderland!

**Rationale:**

Fantasy has always been a safe haven for me. It has served as my guide, my best friend and my teacher throughout my academic life. On face value, fantasy fiction writing (especially modern) serves as a source of entertainment for young and old readers alike. As I have progressed through academia, my relationship with fiction and its authors has changed drastically. It is very difficult for me to read for entertainment, as I now constantly pick apart the passages in search of a deeper meaning. This type of reading is the polar opposite of how some like to read, however I believe there is immense value within fantasy literature when it comes to deeper meanings outside the world of entertainment. My love for the fantasy genre began at a very young age. My grandma would call me every single night and create a story of pure fiction that fit into a larger narrative she spent years building with me. She told me stories where I was no longer a six year old boy, but a full grown man, battling beasts and capturing them to display on exhibit in my very own zoo. Each night my older self fought and outsmarted dragons, bigfoot, sea monsters and so much more to then bring them home for education purposes. Though not a canonical work or a multi-million dollar franchise, my grandma was able to weave those fictional stories that shaped who I wanted to become as a person. She helped me discover myself then, and with this unit I hope to pass that torch to my students. I have grown up quite a bit from when I sat beneath the covers and dreamed of lassoing king kong, and the stories I’ve experienced since then have made me who I am today. In this unit, I hope to help students discover who they truly are and look beyond what lies at face value for themselves and their peers. I have chosen several literary works that tie in to this theme of self discovery, and many of them did turn into million dollar movies. However I don't want my students to lose all sense of what an author might be trying to conceal (discreetly or blatantly) within their novel regarding self discovery within their novel.

**Introduction to the unit:**

Within this unit of study I hope to create a space for students in which they feel comfortable looking deeper into their own consciousness. We will pull back the cover of fiction and study what lies beneath the surface of not just canonical works of fiction, but also several other YA novels and other fiction pieces. Fantasy is a valuable resource, especially for younger readers. This unit hopes to tap in to that resource, and show students that authors use fiction not only as a source of entertainment, but also as a way to layer in important themes and messages regarding modern times and personal relationships. The main canonical work focused on during this unit is *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carol. I hope to use this book as a stepping stone into rich fantasy fiction. The movies are widely known, however the book is seldom read by younger readers. Alice goes through a journey of self discovery in this piece, and she is influenced by numerous adversaries along the way. It is one of the most popular fantasy/self discovery stories, which is why I chose it as my centerpiece. There is also an accompanying film to this book, directed by Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackon and Hamilton Luske and produced in 1951 by Disney. I plan on utilizing the book to film format from Dr. Mary Warner’s English 112B class as a main assignment for this unit and the 1951 animated *Alice in Wonderland* is the first film we will watch as a class.

Before we begin reading the novel and viewing the film, I will prepare a writing activity for the class. It is an icebreaker activity in which each student starts with a sheet of paper with only one sentence on it. There could be a shared sentence or it could be a random starter sentence for a story. For example, a starter sentence I might use could be, “The lonely wizard walked along the mountain path, then suddenly he heard a strange noise”. Each student will write their own unique line after the starter sentence to begin the story. Line after line, they will pass the sheets around until each page is entirely filled. Though this does not necessarily have to be a fantasy story, it is a fantastic bonding experience for students when they all come together to create twenty plus unique stories. Some students may choose to turn the story more personal or some may stick with the initial theme. I will then instruct the students to read their stories aloud so that everyone can hear how their line fits into the story as a whole. This icebreaker will not only introduce the students to each other's writing, it also serves as a gateway for discovering more about themselves as we progress further into the unit.

**Understanding the Journey of Self Discovery In Adolescents:**

In winter of 2016, authors Chris Crutcher and Laurie Halse Anderson took part in a collaborative conversation for the Alan review. In this discussion, they talked about what it means for the adult to observe a young teen progress through adolescence. Crutcher said in response to one of the interviewer’s questions regarding how the media portrays the journey of young adults, “It’s getting better, I think, but for a long time, a significant number of teenage movies played off the impulsiveness of teenagers—and in a far too simplistic way. Some of them were funny, and there’s something to be said for hyperbole, but there wasn’t a lot of balance. I think that’s changed in the movies, but I think there still is some sense among a lot of adults that teenagers are impossible to understand or that they can’t be reached. I think the more we understand that adolescence is a time of becoming and we force ourselves to remember our own becoming, the better chance we have of making connections.” (ALAN v43n2 - Trusting Teens and Honoring Their Experiences: A Collaborative Conversation). This ties in perfectly with my rationale, as when I was creating this unit, I thought back to my own time of becoming. Tapping into that side of a young adult might help them down their path through not only writing and school, but their life in general. I hope my students will be able to locate the differences and similarities between the book version of Alice in Wonderland compared to the movie. Laurie Halse Anderson then responded to the same , “There is a lot of lazy screenplay writing in storylines that have to do with teenagers. Film and television constantly sell them short, which is frustrating. I think some of this is done hand-in hand with the needs of advertisers, who are hungry for the money in teens’ wallets and desperate to establish brand loyalty with them. This exploitation is most heinous when it manipulates adolescents’ need to belong and their insecure, confused sense of identity. Other mainstream media don’t do much better. The recent Time Magazine ( [2015](https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v43n2/anderson.html#time) ) list of “The 100 Best YA Books of All Time” showed an appalling lack of understanding about the definition of “young adult literature” (the list includes books like Charlotte’s Web and Mary Poppins ), as well as a near total disregard of books that have non-White characters in lead roles. Irresponsible journalists too often reach for stereotypical representations rather than dig under the surface of the story. All of these misguided accounts of the adolescent experience make it hard for our culture to understand, and properly love and support, teens.” (ALAN v43n2 - Trusting Teens and Honoring Their Experiences: A Collaborative Conversation). I hope that by discussing the book to film aspects of not only my canonical centerpiece, but two other popular YA stories in modern literature and media, my students will grasp a better understanding of the fantasy genre and how it depicts the journey of adolescents.

**Reading The Text:**

We will then read *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* as a class. I will hand out journals to each student titled, “\_\_\_\_\_\_\_’s adventures in wonderland” which will serve as a place for them to answer discussion questions and draft their own short stories pertaining to the novel. Two discussion questions and two short stories a week should help to keep the students engaged with the text. The short stories will be based around developing their own fantastical character to add to the cast of the novel. In addition to that, students will choose a character from the text and rewrite several scenes from that character's perspective instead of Alice’s. Students will choose three scenes from various parts of the book involving their selected character and rewrite the scenes in their own style using that character's voice. At the end of each week, students can opt to share one of the things they wrote in their journal for that week.

We will then watch the film version of the book and discuss whether or not the film adaptation was an accurate portrayal of the story. Students will answer a final discussion question pertaining to the book and the film. There will be a total of three books and films watched for this unit, and students will be able to choose which book/film they wish to do a book to film assignment on as the final project for the unit. The goal of reading Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and watching the corresponding film is to show students how Lewis Carol used the fantasy genre to create a timeless message about self discovery and bravery. The questions asked and stories written will build upon their knowledge of the genre, and train their hand at locating messages and themes within canonical texts.

**Additional YA book/film choices:**

The other two books I chose for this unit are *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl and *Howl’s Moving Castle* by Dianne Wynne Jones. I chose *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* because it was the book/movie studied by the class I observed during my field observation hours and it deals with similar themes that tie in to identity and self discovery. The class I watched talked about how it is not only Charlie that discovers himself, but also Willy Wonka. The reader gets a closer look into Willy Wonka’s life and his journey through adolescence which eventually leads him to create the chocolate factory. This book touches on mental health issues as well as class separation and wealth discrimination which are key concepts in YA literature. I would conduct a very similar assignment pathing with a few various differences in order to keep the students engaged with a new text. A new journal would be assigned for this book and its film counterpart titled, “\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and the Chocolate Factory” in which the students would again answer discussion questions and create characters that could be part of the storyline. We would compare Charlie’s journey to that of Alice, and locate the differences between their situations as characters. These exercises in the journal serve to help students stylize their own writing by exposing themselves to new types of fantasy literature. Both stories are rooted in reality, however they each contain their own unique world far different than anything the students have seen in their own lives. These journals the students keep will help them on their final assignment for the unit, as they will be able to go back and reference them in order to create an analysis book to film paper on one of the three books we read. We would then watch the film version of the book and compare it to Tim Burton’s 2005 film. Students will then have to answer a final discussion question comparing the journeys of Charlie and Willy Wonka to Alice’s.

The final book/film we will be reviewing is *Howl’s Moving Castle* by Dianne Wynne Jones. I fell in love with this book because of Dr. Mary Warner’s book to film assignment in English 112B. The book and the film have such a unique style, and that ties in perfectly with the theme of self discovery and identity. Sophie is the main character of Jones’s novel, and she goes through many different trials and tribulations in order to discover who she really is. She begins the story with a sort of underlying self loathing, never really thinking she lives up to anyone’s expectations. She moves her way through a complete fantasy world and finds her way with the help of a powerful magic wielding wizard named Howl. A third and final journal will be kept for this book/film and it will be titled, “\_\_\_\_\_\_’s moving castle”. Each student will again answer weekly questions regarding the novel and how it relates to the previous two discussed in class, while developing their own character to fit into the story. This story will close out the three novels discussed for this unit, and will hopefully bring some self reflection for the students participating and allow them to discover something about themselves and their writing. This story is an empowering one, and it takes place in an extremely fantasy world. Jones drafted a strong and confident character in Sophie, one I hope my students will be able to relate to. After answering a final question regarding how this story fits into our analysis of self discovery and identity in a young adult's journey, we will move on to the final book to film assignment for the unit. The students will now have created three personalized journals from which to pick from when selecting their book to film topic paper. They can use these journals to help them draft their book to film paper after selecting one of the three stories reviewed in class.

**Closing The Unit:**

The final assignment will be an analysis paper comparing and contrasting the book of choice to its film counterpart. There is a lot of value in an assignment like this, and it will give the students an in-depth understanding of the author/director’s message behind their work. Using their journals and their knowledge of the characters they studied and drafted, they will be able to create a book to film paper that highlights the differences and similarities between the book and film. They will be able to reference and cite the other book to film instances we studied earlier in the unit. Their journals will be filled with things they noticed in the story and in the movie which will hopefully act as a starting point for their papers. I wanted choice to be an important part of this unit, which is why they have a journal for each story. It allows them to have a fair and even understanding of each book/film so that they can make the best choice. I hope that by the end of their time with all three choices, they have a better understanding of not only who they are as a writer, but also who they are as a person. By exposing the students to so many different types of fantasy literature, the goal is that they will be able to take aspects from pieces that are canonical and combine that with more modern fantasy writing to improve their own techniques. I hope they see that it is okay to take refuge in fantasy, and that it is okay to express yourself using your imagination.

**Extending the Unit:**

1. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, J.K. Rowling

This is the third installment of the Harry Potter series and is one of the books we covered in Dr. Mary Warner’s English 112B class. Harry undergoes some extremely traumatizing and personal experiences in this story, and it is one of the more prominent books with an theme of identity and self discovery in the fantasy genre. The dementor creatures in this book are described as beings that suck out the joy and happiness of a person, thus rendering that person down to their worst memories. Harry deals with this close hand, and the dementors could represent mental illness on a larger scale. Something like depression or anxiety bares down on many students, acting as their own dementors. This book could be their patronus.

1. *The Novice*, Taran Matharu

This is a personal favorite of mine, and it was my initial thought as a pair for this unit. It is the first installment to The Summoner series by Taran Matharu. The story follows a young teen named Fletcher in a fantasy world filled with demons and mages. Fletcher was orphaned as a child, with no memory of his parents or where he came from. He found work at a blacksmith shop in a town he was left in as a baby, and soon discovers he possesses the ability to summon demons and control them. It is definitely a story of self discovery and identity as Fletcher learns he is not just the apprentice to a blacksmith, but the last heir to a royal house. This story deals with class differences, racism, identity and much more which is why it is a perfect fit for the unit. Taran Matharu is also a very prominent author of color in the moden YA society, and my unit would not be complete without introducing my students to his work. I have had the pleasure of meeting him in person, and our interactions inspired me even more to become a teacher.

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