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Dr. Warner
English 112B
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Unit of Study
Science Fiction and Fantasy: Make-believe Worlds as Commentary on Our Own.

Intro to Unit

My unit is based around the idea that fantasy realms, while intriguing in themselves, can act as a commentary on our own world. A lot of stigma surrounding sci-fi and fantasy can be traced back to the belief that nothing can be garnered from it. On the contrary, some of the best loved and best written works of these genres have so much to offer young adult readers. One of the arguments for teaching young adult literature is that it addresses concerns or dilemmas faced by young adults; this in turn is used against sci-fi and fantasy, because when will a student ever have to use his magic wand to defeat the darkest wizard of all time? It is important not to get bogged down by the impossibilities within these genres. Instead, this unit hopes to help students recognize the use of fantasy as a vehicle for a hard look at reality.

The intent with this unit is to make it versatile to accommodate the range of readers/grade levels in high school. While some pieces listed have gory plot twists, I would argue that they are not gratuitous in nature, and while some other works seem too simple for a high school work, I would argue that there is much more to them than meets the eye.

The centerpiece for this unit is The Golden Compass by Philip Pullman. This canonical work speaks volumes to the idea that a world need not be real to talk about the real world. One of the best things about young adult literature is it's ability

to be enjoyed by the young and old; The Golden Compass encompasses this idea to the fullest. Pullman's ability to create a brand new world that has so much to say about our own is the reason that this book has so much to offer students in a classroom setting.

Launching the Unit

To begin this unit, I would have students examine the poem *Jabberwocky* by Lewis Carroll. The poem should be read aloud, and then students should be given an opportunity to either sketch or write down what they perceived to have happened within the poem. This is aimed to be a very free activity; students are able to choose the media with which they would like to express the scenes they imagined from the poem. About 10 minutes should suffice for this portion, but extending it is always an option in the class in engaged. Once that is complete, the students should be able to either pair-share, or come back as a class to discuss the similarities and differences within their interpretations of the poem. The important take-away from this activity is that while the poem consists largely of made up words, the larger intent is still accessible. Below are some leading questions that will help move the discussion towards the unit.

1. How similar are everyone's ideas about *Jabberwocky*? Why is that?
2. What do you think Carroll's intent was when he chose to conjure his own words?
3. How is the inherent meaning picked up on by others if the words aren't real?

While some of these questions might seem a little pedestrian, the key is to apply these ideas to the larger picture of an imaginary world.

Centerpiece Work

The centerpiece work for this unit, The Golden Compass, can be taught in many different ways. In terms of this unit, a focus on parallels between our own world and the book is key.

1. Abuse of Power: This theme is rampant throughout the book. Where does it appear? Who has the most power, and who abuses it?
2. Ethics: Morality and ethics, particularly in the scientific realm, are in question throughout the novel. This can not only spur on a discussion of morality/ethics within the novel, but can also be applied to current dilemmas (i.e. cloning, abortion, and stem cell research).
3. Loss of Innocence: The idea of innocence, and its ability to be lost to us, also crops up throughout the novel. This theme can be talked about on many different levels. For instances, has Lyra lost her innocence? Who in the novel would be considered an “innocent”, and who would not? Why?

These ideas are all relatable to the real world, regardless of what world they are presented in. While this is the case, exploring how Pullman uses fantasy is important. It is important to ask **why** the author chose to build their universe the way they did. A great example from this novel is daemons. It is important for students to delve into the idea that Pullman chose to have daemons as part of his

novel for a reason. What do the daemons throughout the novel reveal to the reader, and why did Pullman choose to show characters that way.

Expanding the Unit

Listed below are three pieces of work that I find to be a great asset to the unit. Lots of other works are available, but I found this to be the most useful, as well as the most diverse. Since fantasy and science fiction exist in such a diverse space, it seemed only fitting that the unit do the same.

Haroun and the Sea of Stories by Salman Rushdie

“Haroun and the Sea of Stories is an adventure novel, the story of Rashid and Haroun, of a father and son and of the son’s attempt to rescue his father and return to him his Gift of Gab. It has a mad bus driver named Butt and a water genie named Iff. It has the wonderful city of Gup (where it is always light) and the terrible land of Chup (where it is always dark). And, perhaps most important, it has P2C2E: Processes Too Complicated to Explain.”

- taken from the book jacket

In this novel, Haroun must embark on a journey to save his father’s story telling ability. Most notable in this work are the puns and word play Rushdie uses constantly throughout. While the book itself can be construed as childlike for a high school audience, it’s clever play on words and current themes are what make it excellent for this unit. Despite being in a fantastical land with fantastical beings, this book deals with topics like the balance of

silence and story, the folly of war, and most notably, censorship. From an author that knows quite a bit about real world censorship, this is an interesting point of view and format for expression. Just like in The Golden Compass, exploring the idea of *why* the author chose to present his ideas in such a way is very significant.

***Sandkings* by George R.R. Martin**

A short story with much more mature content, *Sandkings* is an excellent work of science fiction. The story surrounds the character Simon Kress, who lives on another world, and who is in desperate need of a new exotic pet. In a tiny shop, he finds the sandkings: small insects connected through a hive mind that not only war between sandkings of other hive minds, but also worship their owner. Driven by his own need to watch them war, Simon Kress begins to starve them, and their idols of him take a dark turn.

This short story is definitely on the dark side; quite a few characters get mauled or eaten. Regardless of some of the gory details, this is an excellent piece. For one, it doesn't shy away from the consequences of actions; if a character does something to warrant a consequence, one occurs. Also, I find that the format of a short story lends itself to deeper analysis from students. With less material to get bogged down in, they are able to focus on the specific passages within the work, as well as the work as a whole. With regards to this unit, strong themes are also present as a commentary on the

real world. Ideas like war, self-indulgence, and corruption are all present within this short story. This is a piece that might also be used as part of an intro to the unit, as a short story can lend itself better to beginning a novel.

Mortal Engines by Philip Reeve

A novel with a strong sense of journey, filled with compelling archetypes, Mortal Engines is a great way to round out this unit. While it is technically a dystopia, this book's imagery and realm are so connected to the science fiction world that it could be included in this unit.

In a post-apocalyptic world where cities have become moving machines, Tom is forced onto a journey with Hester Shaw, a scar-faced girl who claims Tom's hero Valentine killed her parents. This novel is filled tales of loss, betrayal, and revenge, all of which relate directly back to the real world. A fast paced read, this would be a great addition to the unit.

Works Cited

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<<http://www.jabberwocky.com/carroll/jabber/jabberwocky.html>>.

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Pullman, Philip. *The Golden Compass*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. Print.

Reeve, Philip. *Mortal Engines: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003. Print.

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Science Fiction and Fantasy

Imaginary World as Commentary
on Our Own World

Rhiannon Hall

Jabberwocky

He took his vorpal sword
in hand:

Long time the maxome
foe he sought

So rested he by the
tumtum tree,

And stood a while in
thought

And while in uffish
thought he stood

The jabberwock, with
eyes of flame

Came whiffling through
the tulgey wood

And burred as it came

Important Questions

- Why are most of our interpretations the same?
- What does this tell us about fantasy, and the language it uses?
- How can we apply this to a larger work?



The Golden Compass





SALMAN
RUSHDIE

HAROUN
AND THE SEA
OF STORIES

ART BY SHO UEHARA

Mortal Engines



Sandkings

“Simon Kress lived alone in a sprawling manor house among the dry, rocky hills fifty kilometers from the city. So, when he was called away unexpectedly on business, he had no neighbors he could conveniently impose on to take his pets. The carrion hawk was no problem; it roosted in the unused belfry and customarily fed itself anyway. The shambler Kress simply shooed outside and left to fend for itself; the little monster would gorge on slugs and birds and rock-jocks. But the fish tank, stocked with genuine Earth piranha, posed a difficulty. Kress finally just threw a haunch of beef into the huge tank. The piranha could always eat each other if he were detained longer than expected. They’d done it before. It amused him.”

Sandkings

Sample Questions for 1st paragraph

- What kind of character is Simon Kress?
- What do we know about the setting to begin with?
- What can we determine about his pets?

Works Cited

Jabberwocky - <http://browse.deviantart.com/art/Jabberwocky-137656965>

The Golden Compass -

<http://browse.deviantart.com/art/golden-compass-sketch-71473259>

Haroun and the Sea of Stories -

<http://browse.deviantart.com/art/Haroun-and-The-Sea-of-Stories-173196267>

Mortal Engines -

<http://browse.deviantart.com/art/Mortal-Engines-chase-209096450>