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Teaching Fantasy: Overcoming the Stigma of Fluff

MELISSA THOMAS

Let me be honest. I'm a fantasy buff. (I'm speaking of swords and sorcery here, not baseball or erotica.) I know very well the idea of fantasy literature conjures up images of pimply adolescents sequestered under the dining room table, rolling twelve-sided dice and having conversations that go something like this: "You *can't* capture me with your Elvin Assassins. I have Peregrine's Protection Spell on." "No, you only said you wanted to *buy* Peregrine's Protection Spell. You never gave up any points to cast it." "Yes, I *did*. It was when your mom made you go pick up your socks." ■ The problem with fantasy literature is

that it has a certain stigma attached to it. This stigma has been identified and debunked by literary critics for quite a while now, yet the genre itself continues to be dismissed as escapist fluff—full of scantily clad sorceresses and wizards with *long* staffs. What seems lacking in acknowledgment are two facts about fantasy that make it perfect classroom fodder:

1. Students like it.
2. It is a metaphor for the human condition—ripe with mythic structures, heroic cycles, and social and religious commentary.

For the uninitiated, this brief discussion of critical topics addressed in fantasy literature can help build a foundation for bringing this well-loved genre into the classroom in a meaningful way.

Defining Fantasy Literature

A fantasy novel usually follows the "Blue Skies, Green Grass" theory. It has oceans, mountains, forests, and fields. It has small towns and big cities, usually medieval in setting but not always. Many fantasy cultures have not yet reached an age of technological sophistication, and most, but not all, deal with some aspect of the supernatural world that has some historical basis in human myth—fairies and elves, for

example. Fantasy novels are set in worlds that readers are familiar with, either because they can see it out the window or have some primal memory of it.

Mythic Structures and Heroic Cycles

Fantasy has a long and noble heritage, beginning with the very first tales ever told around a campfire of bowls over the sky with holes in them that let in the light of heaven, or of monsters named Grendel and heroes named Beowulf. We speak in metaphor when we don't have better poetry, and fantasy literature, over time, has evolved as a metaphor for human experience. It tells of simpler days when the extraordinary wasn't, when chivalry (otherwise known as good manners) was an art, when every poor peasant had a chance at greatness—as long as he or she hooked up with the right wizard at the right time.

The heroic cycles in fantasy are tailored to students. Fantasy always has a hero. He or she is usually an orphan, disposing of inconvenient parental monitoring. He or she is sent on a quest of great importance, reflecting the need of students to make an impact on their world. He or she meets up with a wise person, reflecting the desire of students for guidance. The hero confronts and conquers the evil foe. How much metaphor is needed? Be the foe Grendel or

Sauruman, it easily represents bullies, drugs, gangs, violence, abuse, prejudice, or any of the obstacles placed before our young, modern-day heroes.

This heroic cycle can be found in a myriad of works. One of the most enduring is Lloyd Alexander's Prydain series, inspired by a collection of Welsh myths and legends called The Mabinogion. Older readers will enjoy David Eddings's *Pawn of Prophecy*, or Joan Aiken's *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*, among others.

Religious Commentary

The two best fantasists of the twentieth century, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, were both religious men who counted George MacDonald as one of their inspirations. In his introduction to *Lilith*, Lewis says, "Nothing was at that time further from my thoughts than Christianity . . . the whole book had about it a sort of cool, morning innocence, and also, quite unmistakably, a certain quality of Death, good Death. What it actually did to me was to convert, even to baptise (that was where the Death came in) my imagination" (xi).

MacDonald, born in 1824, was a minister who published several fantasy novels before dying in poverty in 1905. His novels are vintage fantasy, containing all the "stock" characters—fairies, elves, a naive hero, dark forests, evil sorceresses, and a quest—while remaining deeply spiritual in nature. One of his more famous books, *Lilith*, revolves around the ancient and nearly forgotten tale of Adam's first wife before Eve. His best characters were, in Lewis's words, "those which reveal how much charity and real wisdom can co-exist with the profession of a theology that seems to encourage neither" (vii). Although MacDonald may be a bit heavy for anything less than serious study, he is worth mentioning as a foundation for religious commentary.

There were other authors after MacDonald, but none whose work was so lasting and elegant as Lewis's. A deeply spiritual man, he wrote several books for children that became his collection of Narnian Tales. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is an ideal companion to any literature class in which the Christian Bible and its influences on literature are studied. In the first book of the series, the struggle for good and evil is reexamined. The Christian Son of God takes the form of an enormous lion named Aslan, who tosses children "in the air with his beautifully velvety paws," (160) and whose arrival begins to thaw

the endless winter of the White Witch. Like the story of Jesus, Aslan sacrifices himself for the sake of the "Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve" (124). And, like Jesus, Aslan rises again:

The stone table was broken in two pieces by a great crack that ran down it from end to end; and there was no Aslan.

"Who's done it?" cried Susan. "What does it mean? Is it more magic?"

"Yes!" said a great voice behind their backs. "It is more magic."

"It means," said Aslan, "that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of Time. But if she could have looked a little further back . . . She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards." (159–60)

Literary criticism about the work abounds, including commentary on Lewis's discussion of the seven deadly sins, one for each book in the series. The books are short and easy to read and can enhance lessons on literature ranging from Spenser's *The Faery Queen* to Dante, since parallels to both works are cited.

History in Fantasy

In 1926 Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien met and forged what was to be a lifelong friendship. Tolkien's name has become synonymous with fantasy, and the genre is still scrutinized with his work in mind. His crowning achievement, *The Hobbit*, was published in 1937, the result of a story he used to tell his children. His idyllic race of Everymen, the Hobbits, personify the purest ideals of human nature. The Hobbits' wisdom is derived from their simplicity and in the end is recognized by their more war-like contemporaries, the dwarves, as illustrated by Thorin's words to Bilbo Baggins:

"No!" said Thorin. "There is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure. If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world." (243)

Tolkien's books remain popular as studies of the devastating effects of war, which he experienced first hand. "The battle for freedom against enslavement and totalitarianism in *The Lord of the Rings* is a direct parallel to both World Wars and human

history,” says critic Michael Skeparnides in his on-line article. “Peace is achieved through diverting both cultural and social paranoia . . . What the “Lord of the Rings” seems to suggest, is that social and racial differences are overcome when the interests and freedoms of each are threatened by invasion. Tolkien provides a fantastical parallel to both World Wars in his novel . . .”

The Hobbit is easy reading for middle school students. However, The Lord of the Rings saga may be more difficult due to its archaic speech and complex plot. Yet it remains a favorite, and with the recent success of the films, which have been lauded as admirably true to the story, it is worth consideration as a teaching tool.

Gender Roles

After Tolkien, fantasy continued to flourish, if not wildly then at least with a consistent glow. Later works began to reflect changing gender roles, but even Tolkien had it in mind in his books. One of Tolkien's characters, Eowyn in the *Pawn of Prophecy*, rebels against the harshness of her role in a patriarchal society by disguising herself as a man. David Eddings's female characters crossed the boundaries of delicacy into the toughness of modern day women due to the collaboration of his wife, Leigh, a formidable lady in her own right—so much so that he wrote an entire book on his popular sorceress character Polgara, detailing her life and deeds and her involvement in the hero Belgarion's eventual success.

Women authors began to break into what was probably one of the most male-dominated arenas of literature, and to flourish. Ursula LeGuin, Octavia Butler, Madeline L'Engle, and others have carved a niche for themselves and others in the world of fantasy, pioneering the way for what has become a slew of women authors. LeGuin's work in science fiction is noted for its study of anarchic and androgynous societies (*The Dispossessed*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*), while her award-winning fantasy series The Earthsea Trilogy remains popular with fantasy enthusiasts. Octavia Butler's books, while mostly science fiction, deserve note here, as her characters are almost exclusively black, and the heroines are female. Though at times both authors may seem to blur that line between fantasy and science fiction, they are, due to their efforts in the field, worth mentioning.

Fantasy has not always been the easiest genre for female authors to break into. As Skeparnides

says, “Ironically [women] have to take on male characteristics in order to overcome . . . What we alarmingly see, is that women must become men and enter the world of men that is ‘war’ . . . to defeat the evil of men.” A worthy note for any discussion of gender roles. Even the Harry Potter books have some gender role issues readers can be directed to. In the very first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Hermione, characterized as the most talented of the bunch in scholastic pursuits, is found helpless and screaming in the bathroom when attacked by a troll. Why didn't she use any of her spells? As the only constant female character in the book, why is she characterized as acerbic and cranky? Why does she have to undergo what amounts to sorcerous cosmetic surgery in a later book in order to be considered attractive?

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Luckily, the role of women in fantasy literature is still evolving, just as is the role of women in society. Many recent authors seem to have tapped into a more truthful or at least more realistic characterization of women who are fallible, sometimes foolish, often funny, obstinate, brave, generous, and kind, and, in short, just as much along for the ride as anyone else.

Social Commentary

More recent fantasy, while retaining that echo of reflecting ideals, is experiencing a dramatic change. Those who may not be fantasy buffs of old will find the fantasy of popular authors like David Eddings and Terry Pratchett full of humor and insight. In addition to religious issues, authors are taking on global issues on a more human scale: hunger, pain, loss, confusion, simple human fallibility, and triumph. Their characters, while remaining fictional, experience very human emotions. David Eddings's Bel-

gariad series became immensely popular during the 1990s due to the simple humanness of its hero, Belgarion, a king in hiding:

The first thing the boy Garion remembered was the kitchen at Faldor's farm. For all the rest of his life he had a special warm feeling for kitchens and those peculiar sounds and smells that seemed somehow to combine into a bustling seriousness that had to do with love and food and comfort and security and, above all, home. No matter how high Garion rose in life, he never forgot that all his memories began in that kitchen. (11)

Eddings opened up an entirely new door to serious fantasy. He allowed for humor not only between the characters and their dialogue (they are often perplexed by the "thees" and "thous" of one of the knights, language that was once standard fantasy fodder), but humor in the writing as well.

Gaining popularity at the same time was Terry Pratchett, a British author now noted for his postmodernist parody. Pratchett is not only a skilled writer, he is also funny, hilariously so, and yet in his hilarity he finds time for social commentary that often surpasses the serious social commentators of our day in its wisdom, as in *Guards! Guards!*:

The Patrician steepled his hands and looked at Vimes over the top of them.

"Let me give you some advice, Captain," he said.

"Yes, sir?"

"It may help you make sense of the world."

"Sir."

"Down there," he said, "are people who will follow any dragon, worship any god, ignore any iniquity. All out of a kind of humdrum, everyday badness. Not really the high, creative loathsomeness of great sinners, but a sort of mass-produced darkness of the soul. Sin, you might say, without a trace of originality. They accept evil not because they say *yes*, but because they don't say *no* . . . One day it's the ringing of the bells and the casting down of the evil tyrant, and the next it's everyone sitting around complaining that ever since the tyrant was overthrown no-one's been taking out the trash. Because the bad people know how to *plan* . . . The good people don't seem to have the knack."

"Maybe . . ." said Vimes. "It's just because people are afraid and alone—" He paused. It sounded pretty hollow, even to him.

He shrugged. "They're just people," he said. "They're just doing what people do." (273–74)

Pratchett's fantasy has come a long way from theological speculation to a sort of human spiritual spank-

Recommended Authors of Fantasy Literature

Joan Aiken	David Eddings
Lloyd Alexander	Neil Gaiman
L. Frank Baum	Norton Juster
John Bellairs	Madeleine L'Engle
Marion Zimmer Bradley	Ursula LeGuin
The Brothers Grimm	C. S. Lewis
Octavia Butler	Terry Pratchett
Lewis Carroll	J. K. Rowling
Susan Cooper	J. R. R. Tolkien
Roald Dahl	T. H. White

ing. And yet it is a spanking we can laugh at because we recognize ourselves in every hypocrisy. Both Pratchett and Eddings, as well as their counterparts, have become immensely popular with audiences of all ages.

Conclusion

It would be a shame to overlook fantasy literature in the classroom simply because it retains that stigma of not being serious writing, when it is clear that works of fantasy have merit in all fields of critical literary examination. Fantasy literature that has something to offer the classroom has at least two traits in common with the lasting work of other genres: humor and humanness.

Where there is spoken language, there will always be myth of some sort. Telling tall tales is as much a part of us as is jumping at the sound of thunder. In essence, what used to be myth has become fantasy. MacDonald, Lewis, Tolkien, and almost every fantasy author to come after them use fantasy as speculation on the human condition or a metaphor for the human plight, both spiritual and physical. But what is most important about fantasy, what separates and frees it from the boundaries of other genres, is that it is an undistilled version of human imagination—momentary worlds and magic that may be at odds with the rational truth, yet continue to reflect our culture and times.

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