Final Paper:

Fantasy as a Teachable Subject: Do, or Don’t?

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Abstract

In High School, it is imperative that educators provide students with the tools to not only read and write at their level, but also the opportunity to relate to the course work, and become passionate about it. This is especially true for English Literature, which involves reading in order to challenge and enlighten students. In order for a young adult to truly grasp anything that they read in a novel, they must be able to connect with the story and the characters, as well as draw key themes and morals from the content. However, many educators will discriminate against Fantasy Literature in the classroom due to its fantastical nature; however, novels within this genre can contain the necessary writing style and content to be suitable for students. A brief history of Fantasy and the debates surrounding it will be provided, and the examples that will be used to support the claim that Fantasy Literature should be in the classroom are Guy Gavriel Kay’s *The Lions of Al-Rassan*, J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*, Mercedes Lackey’s and James Mallory’s *The Obsidian Trilogy*, and Mercedes Lackey’s *The Last-Herald Trilogy*. The writing style of each author will be analyzed for its challenging and enticing nature, and the key issues of religion, women’s rights, homosexuality/same-sex relationships, and ethnicity within the novel will be addressed. Finally, opinions from students and professionals about Fantasy as useable material in high school will be discussed in order to conclude that Fantasy Literature is not only appropriate for classroom learning, but even recommended.

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Imagination has shaped the world as it is; has given it color, splendor, and excitement, but what has shaped imagination? What stage of development in childhood is responsible for whether or not a person sees the world in black and white, or in the entire color spectrum, and beyond? One causal factor for imagination has been addressed by multiple authors and psychologists, and this causal factor is Fantasy Literature. Psychologist Bettleheim’s study showed that children who lacked Fantasy in their lives also lacked imagination and creativity, leading to the conclusion that this form is literature should not only be included in a child’s life, but also nurtured (Tunnel, 1994). Yet few English curriculums in High School include Fantasy novels, despite the fact that this genre present a wide variety of writing styles both in content and style, and can cover multiple themes in one work, such as religion, women’s rights, sexual orientation, and ethnicity.

Fantasy as a genre actually began before written literature was born, with “myths and folktales, fairy tales and fables” (Duckett, 2007, p. 32). In these times, “all literature was fantasy” (Stableford, 2005), such as legends about Gods and Goddesses and talking animals (Hercules, anyone?); however, as humankind evolved, Fantasy was pushed aside until the 20th and 21st Centuries, when it came back into the literary world with a vengeance (Stableford, 2005). While Fantasy made a comeback in this period, it is continuously disregarded as ‘fluff’ (“A fan fic[tion in] which the story has no plot. Only humorous or romantic” [Urban Dictionary] or “Entertainment or writing perceived as trivial or superficial” [Google Dictionary]), unrealistic, childish, and inappropriate as classroom material. Many continue to believe this despite the existence of a multitude of both enlightening and challenging Fantasy novels, such as those by Guy Gavriel Kay, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Mercedes Lackey. Kay’s *The Lions of Al-Rassan* is a historically-based Fantasy novel that describes the story of Jehane Bet Ishak, a female physician, in the midst of ethnic and religious feuds, touching upon these two issues, as well as female empowerment, slavery, war, and family. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* *Trilogy* is also framed around the history of the two World Wars, describing the journey of Frodo Baggins in his quest to destroy the One Ring, and includes recurring religious themes, emphasizes the importance of friendship, the fight against oppression, and how even ‘the little guy’ can change the world. Finally, Lackey’s *Obsidian Trilogy* and *The Last Herald-Mage Trilogy* tell the stories of two ordinary, rejected boys who slowly become the world’s last hope of survival against evil, focusing on sibling love, the balance of good and evil, homosexuality, and the importance of controlling and using one’s power for good.

Before going into the details of how these novels provide literary proof for the defense of Fantasy as a tool in high school class rooms, one must become familiar with some of the debates surrounding this subject. Michael Tunnel’s article categorizes these debates into four main criticisms: psychological, violence, frightening young children, and a waste of time (1994). Those who argue according to the first fear that Fantasy will cause children and young adults to fall “out of touch with reality” (1994, p. 607), begin to believe that all of their wishes and wants will be granted to them, and may lead young people to join cults (due to the fantastical, ungodly content). However, Tunnel, as well as psychologist Bruno Bettleheim, provide proof based on studies that it is children whose lives do not include Fantasy that resort to fantastical ways of comprehending reality (1994, p. 607). This is due to the fact that they are being forced into a harsh, adult reality too quickly, forcing them to use unrealistic ways to cope with their situation (1994, p. 607). Moreover, Tunnel argues that it is actually semi-realistic fiction that causes young adults to believe that they can attain the unattainable (such as becoming a millionaire) due to the fact that the examples used in these stories are based in reality (1994, p. 607). Meanwhile, Fantasy is clearly impossible; thus, the children focus on the story and the themes, rather than try to apply it to their everyday lives.

The second core criticism, that of violence, suggests “that the so-called violent acts in these stories will breed violence in children” (1994, p. 609). This criticism is disputed by Tunnel through the work of Ephraim Biblow, who performed an experimental study that showed Fantasy-rich children to react less aggressively then Fantasy-poor children (1994, p. 609-610). Tunnel explains that this is due to the creativity and critical thinking that develops with the help of Fantasy, allowing Fantasy-rich children to think through their problems and solve them with words rather than with physical force (1994, p. 610). Moreover, Tunnel argues that youth, especially children before the age of eight, are at Kohlberg’s “Premoral Stage”, meaning that they believe that ‘bad’ people must be punished, and ‘good’ people must be rewarded (1994, p. 610). Thus, in order for a child’s need for justice to be satisfied, there must be consequences for negative behavior (1994, p. 610).

The issue of violence links closely to the issue of frightening children. However, Tunnel argues that “what fairy tales provide children is a message of hope, not fear” (1994, p. 611), due to the fact that there is always a hero present in Fantasy that succeeds in overcoming any of the frightening obstacles within the novel (1994, p. 611).

Finally, many teachers, librarians, parents, and other readers or educators argue that Fantasy is simply a waste of time (1994, p. 611). This is the primary criticism that will be addressed and criticized in this paper, focused upon for its discreet yet infringing character in the minds of too many.

To begin the rebuttal against this claim, one must look at the writing style of Fantasy novels. Is the language challenging enough for a high school setting; can it be used to hone and improve a student’s reading, writing, and analytical skills? Anyone who has read *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Lions of Al-Rassan* would agree with this point, due to the authors’ use of a complex, detailed, and descriptive narrative, such as Tolkien’s description of Frodo’s morning in Rivendell: “he […] watched the pale, cool sun rise above the far mountains, and shine down, slanting through the thin silver mist; the dew upon the yellow leaves was glimmering, and the woven nets of gossamer twinkled on every bush” (Tolkien, 1991, p. 311). Using complex, advanced language and an incredible amount of imagery, Tolkien and Kay paint a masterpiece for each of their creations, including the characters themselves. Tolkien ranges from Gandalf, with “his long white hair, sweeping silver beard, and his broad shoulders, [making] him look like some wise king of ancient legend” (p. 295) to Aragorn, “a strange-looking weather-beaten man […with] a shaggy head of dark hair freckled with grey, and in a pale stern face a pair of keen grey eyes” (p. 205). Meanwhile, Kay describes “Zabira of Cartada [as] her own ceremony. She was an exquisite supplicant in a crimson-dyed, black-bordered gown over a golden undergown” (1995, p. 200) Moreover, Tolkien created unique dialects and languages for his ‘species’, such as Elvish (for which an entire alphabet is available), and the language of Mordor.

However, teachers and librarians have argued that these two authors provide a writing style that is above the skills of an average high school student; therefore, their books are too advanced to be considered young adult literature, which is when Mercedes Lackey must be observed. Her language, while still maintaining a thorough, descriptive nature as well as a unique voice for each character, is more easily grasped than the previous two. For example, her use of shortened sentences can be contrasted to Tolkien’s long phrases, such as her description of a battlefield in *To Light a Candle*: “Today the air was still, the weather was clear and bright. The harsh mountain light showed every detail clearly. The dryness of the air had leached all moisture from the bodies, and not even birds had come to despoil what little the coldwarg and their allies had left behind. Every detail was starkly, terribly, clear” (Lackey & Mallory, 2004, p. 212). Lackey succeeds in describing not only the look, but also the feel of the environment, while employing a more comprehendible writing style. She continues to employ this style in *Magic’s Pawn,* describing how the main character’s companion has “eyes so full of compassion and love that he knew their owner would forgive him anything. That love reached out for him, and flowed over into him. It couldn’t erase his loss, but it could share the pain – and it didn’t blame him for what had happened” (Lackey, 1989, p. 210). Lackey provides a clear, written version of both the physical and the emotional aspects of the situation without overwhelming the reader, which is especially important for youth. It allows them to connect the setting of a novel to the feelings that such a place instills in the characters, to which they can relate to (rather than skipping over the long, boring descriptive parts).

On the other hand, many teachers focus primarily on the content of the novels they use in class. How does Fantasy provide important morals and values, and discuss worldly issues, if it is entirely within the fantastical? The first way in which these novels do exactly this is by including religious themes and undertones. Tolkien’s trilogy is well known for its Christian foundation, using fantasy-based scenarios in order to describe stories from the Bible. Examples of these include: Frodo knowingly sacrificing himself to destroy the One Ring, just as Jesus sacrificed himself to save human kind from sin; and the final battle of Minas Tirith, when Eowyn, a royal female, kills Sauron’s most powerful warrior against all odds, just as David kills the giant, Goliath (Tolkien, 1991, p. 530, 1101-1102). Most of all, this trilogy highlights the power of good over evil when it comes to religion, as well as forgiveness.

*The Obsidian Trilogy* also contains Christian undertones, though not as explicit. An example of such is how “each dragon is fated to Bond with one Mage – his Bondmate. After which that Mage becomes incredibly powerful […] and the dragon’s life becomes incredibly short, for when his Bondmate dies, he dies as well” (Lackey, 2004, p. 300), much like how Jesus lived the life of a man in order to save the world from sin. However, Lackey’s novels teach about the diversity of religion, and the possibility to form alliances between the two. The Wild Magic in her trilogy serves a natural, higher power that restores the balance of the world; thus, whenever any Wild Mage casts a spell, they must pay a price (which also teaches young adults responsibility to the world around them). On the other hand, High Magick uses the energy of the user to fuel spells, and had previously been considered as incompatible with the Wild Magic. However, in a moment of need to fight against the Endarkened, “Wild Magic an High Magick had worked together” (Lackey, 2006, p. 11). Therefore, Lackey could be used to teach students the equality of different religious beliefs, and that they can work together to make the world a better place.

Another ‘hot topic’ in regards to literature is the issue of women’s rights depicted in the novel. Thomas, a strong advocate for Fantasy literature, acknowledges that one of Fantasy’s weak points is its reinforcement of gender norms (that men are meant to be saving the world, and if women wish to do so, they must disguise themselves as men) (2003). Even Tolkien’s two primary female characters, Arwen and Eowyn, support this gender bias. Arwen is only referenced in relation to her father or her relationship with Aragorn, while Eowyn is a strong female character who plays a major role in ending the war with Sauron, but must disguise herself as a man to do so (1991). However, due to the fact that “*The Lord of the Rings* is a direct parallel to both World Wars and human history” (Thomas, 2003, p. 62), an educator could use these characters to teach their students about women’s roles during the World Wars.

*The Lions of Al-Rassan* does a much more thorough job at defying heteronormative gender roles. Not only is the main character of the novel female, but she is also a skilled physician who has “had to evolve her own methods” (Kay, 1995, p. 23) in order to become known as one of the best in her trade, while also being “the only woman doctor in Fezana” (1995, p. 73). Moreover, she is depicted as sexually liberal, blunt and outspoken, and whenever she is confronted with a situation in which she is expected to ‘act like a woman’, she does the complete opposite, mocking gender norms with her insolence. She performs such mockery when a Captain with whose company she is riding with demands where she will be travelling next. Rather than answer him honestly, she taunts him sexually, exaggerating the typical role of ‘woman’, until he responds with: “This […] is distressingly familiar. A woman putting me in my place” (1995, p. 96). He says this because his wife, Miranda Belmonte, known as one of the most beautiful women in the land, also defies gender norms. When she hears that her husband has been exiled, rather than mourn over the fact that she will not see him for two years, she organizes his kidnapping and holds him hostage, all so that she can “stab him with an arrow” (1995, p. 154). Thus, Jehane bet Ishak and Miranda Belmonte can act as an example for young females, encouraging them to empower themselves and break away from traditional expectations.

Finally, Idalia in Lackey’s *The Obsidian Trilogy* is a renowned Wild Mage, was one of the few people to survive being exiled from her home city of Armethalieh, destroys the Endarkened, and is resurrected as an Elf to later become an Elven Queen, and is known as “Saint Idalia” a thousand years later (Lackey, 2004, 2004 & 2006). Therefore, while there are many Fantasy novels that have female characters who follow traditional gender norms, it does not mean that they have to be taught that way. Furthermore, there are a number of fantastical women who completely defy, and even make fun of, idealistic views of women.

Even more controversial and heavily discussed than women’s rights is homosexuality. Many teachers aim to include discussions surrounding same sex relationships in their classrooms to raise awareness and combat homophobia, but most characters in novels that are gay are either secondary, or have identical story lines. In order to provide a more complete, and less typical, example of a same-sex relationship, an educator could use the friendship between Tolkien’s characters Gimli (a Dwarf) and Legolas (an Elf). While the two are not directly dubbed a couple, it is a possible interpretation, especially since a strong friendship between an Elf and a Dwarf is so unlikely. More so than these, teachers could focus on the bond between Sam Wise Gamgee and Frodo Baggins. Sam actually marries a woman at the end of the trilogy, but the love between these two protagonists shows readers that such a strong relationship should not be shunned, but celebrated. When Frodo destroys the ring, he simply says: “I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam” (Tolkien, 1991, p. 1240).

While Tolkien does not reveal any of his characters as homosexual, Mercedes Lackey does in *The Last Herald-Mage Trilogy*. Her main character, Vanyel, meets his soul mate, ‘Lendel, and falls in love; however, this is not what drives the entire novel (1989). Instead, Vanyel must grow as a Herald-Mage and overcome obstacles completely separate from his homosexuality, which is just another part of who he is (1989). In fact, in the second novel, *Magic’s Promise*, Vanyel is worried that his being *shay’a’chern* (gay) is the reason for the fear others show when they are around him. Meanwhile, in reality, it is his reputation as the most powerful Herald-Mage to ever have lived that causes this terrified admiration (1990, p. 70). Therefore, teachers can use Vanyel as an example of how one’s sexual orientation should not be feared, but accepted as a piece of who they are.

Finally, in Canada especially, teachers are expected to promote multiculturalism in their class, and confront problems, such as racism, when it arises. Since Fantasy is based in the make-believe, many educators find it difficult to believe that novels within the genre could cover subjects such as race oppression or ethnic feud. However, both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Lions of Al-Rassan* revolve around conflicts between different races, religions, and ethnicities, and ultimately aim to promote alliances between these peoples in order to fight oppression. As mentioned above, Tolkien’s Elves and Dwarves had been enemies for centuries; one race loving forests and nature, the other seeking wealth by creating vast caves and mines, yet an alliance was drawn between the two in order to defeat Sauron, the ultimate oppressor (1991). The Ents (also known as Tree-Hearders) had cut themselves off entirely from Middle Earth, retreating into the forest of Fangorn, until they roused themselves from their slumber in order to defeat Sauron’s pawn, Saruman (1991). Finally, even men were at constant war, but came together for the final battle against the enemy, which ultimately led to the whole race of men being united under one rule (1991). Therefore, educators could use these examples as support for the importance of equality for the common good, the ability to build bridges despite personal difference, and the power of friendship.

Kay’s *Lions of Al-Rassan* is also heavily laden with the issue of religious and ethnic feud. Jehane, the protagonist, is of Kindath faith, who are oppressed by those of the Asharite religion, forced to live in their own quarter within the city (1995). However, Jehane does not allow this to restrict her, arguing that she “is more than Kindath” (1995, p. 52). She could be used as an example of someone being able to find a place in the world, despite the difficulties of their religious past. Moreover, due to the fact that she travels through Asharite lands and never once hides her identity as a Kindath, an educator could point out her courage, as well as her determination to show that being of a different religion does not make her lesser, but equal. Furthermore, while Jehane is from Al-Rassan, she forms a strong alliance with Captain Rodrigo from Valledo, who is of the Jaddite faith (1995). The two fought to defend a village in Al-Rassan from a Valledan attack; however, Captain Rodrigo could have easily left it alone without any consequences (1995). This relationship highlights the importance of a higher set of morals than that determined by your place of birth, and the recognition that one’s ethnicity should not determine ones actions.

Not only do these examples of Fantasy literature provide ample reasons for teachers to at least consider using this genre in their classrooms, but real life reactions and opinions from young adults also support this argument. Crowe’s 2002 study on high school students’ thoughts about non-fiction highlight the fact that, while “there’s a huge pile of fantasy trash out there […] if you know where to look […] there’s also some great stuff” (p. 115). Fantasy novels succeed in “appeal[ing] to young adults because, in addition to the strangeness of the characters, they contain strange characters like themselves” (Small, 2005, p. 138). Therefore, while characters within Fantasy are fantastical, they still have characteristics and personality traits that the reader can connect do. Furthermore, many young adults feel strange one way or another, may it be because of their height or the way they dress; thus, reading about creatures who are also strange allows these students to relate to the characters, and become more involved in the novel (2005). Overall, most agree that the important part of the novel is not what genre it belongs to, but whether or not “they teach what [students] should value” (2002, p. 115). Therefore, evidence from written novels as well as opinions from teachers, students, and other academics in the field of education proves that Fantasy does not merit a loss of credibility just because it is ‘make believe’. The morals, themes, topics, and writing style are must be criticized when choosing material for a classroom, not the genre.

While there are an innumerable amount of subjects that educators feel should be covered within their course material, the four listed above are considered particularly important for the development of the student as a person. Not only do they provide as an academic learning experience, helping students improve on their reading, writing, and analytical skills, but also provide awareness about issues that are found worldwide. This gives students an opportunity to become passionate about the world around them, and the tools to present their passion in written, or even oral, form. Therefore, the inclusion of such themes and morals in the novels by Kay, Tolkien, and Lackey proves that Fantasy literature is not a waste of time, nor is it inappropriate in the classroom. In fact, it may even be preferred over fiction and non-fiction novels due to its unique approach to issues, its creative writing style, and its appeal to young people in general.

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