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Fantasy Books: There's a Whole Other World Out There

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What This Unit Will Teach

My favorite genre is fantasy. The idea that the magical can happen in the midst of the ordinary is fantastic. Fantasy really makes the phrase "Escape with a good book" meaningful. Our everyday world is at times quite predictable and mundane. Some of us dream of having magical powers or coming across a mythical beast. The supernatural is so very intriguing to me. I know that many students feel the same way. They eat up anything that has magic, dragons, wizards or talking beasts. Stories like that seem so real that sometimes the fantasy and the reality become intertwined and hard to separate. I once had a girl who was puzzled because she didn't realize that dragons didn't exist. I in no way want to encourage children to live in a world that is outside our realm and believe in the things that happen within a fantasy novel. However, I do enjoy seeing the excitement brewing within students when they are really into a fantasy novel. There's definitely a different passion for fantasy than there is for any other genre.

As a middle school sixth grade teacher I notice that the majority of my students prefer fantasy novels to most other genres. I have noticed the trend in fantasy take a huge upswing over the past decade or so. It's almost as if the other genres have taken a back seat and are waiting in the shadows for things to calm down. Since I see such resounding interest in fantasy I decided that I should write a curriculum unit focusing solely on that genre. If this is what interests our students, why not use that material to provide a teaching device. We've all had our moments of teaching a lesson only to look out and see the bored faces out in the crowd. If fantasy is what interests the students then perhaps that interest will be enough to keep our students focused for the Reading and English objectives we are required to teach.

I wish therefore to create a unit devoted purely to the genre of fantasy. We will look at fantasy in forms such as picture book and novel. If a student is resistant to fantasy, that might pose a challenge in teaching this unit. However, I believe that the teaching approach in this unit and the stories that will be taught will draw any student into an enjoyable experience with fantasy.

This unit will focus on reading and analyzing the genre of fantasy. There are some specific aspects of fantasy that make it a genre of its own. We will study these aspects and learn what makes this genre so engrossing. In addition to reading, we will do some writing. It is amazing how easy it is for kids to create the supernatural. My goal is to have pairs or small groups of students write an original piece of fantasy with illustrations—basically, to create a fantasy picture story book. This will come of course with coaching and reassurance. They have that

creative spark in them, we all know that. But very often the spark cannot surface due to all the "school" that they are given. Hopefully the magical world of fantasy will intrigue the students enough to be free to write about it.

The practical purpose of this unit is the teaching of literary elements. We will incorporate as many literary devices as possible, such as plot, characterization, point of view, conflict, foreshadowing/flashback, tone/mood, and setting. We will look at where these devices appear in various texts. We will also concentrate on including them in the original fantasy stories we write.

For the short stories I intend to do teacher read alouds. For the novels I intend to do literature circles. Some of the stories I am intending to use would be novels such as *Harry Potter, Chronicles of Narnia, Rabbit Hill, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, James and the Giant Peach, The Indian in the Cupboard, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, A Wrinkle in Time, The Lord of the Rings* and *Charlotte's Web*. We will also incorporate some fantasy short stories such as *Jumanji, Curious George, Sylvester and the Magic Pebble,The Tub People, The Velveteen Rabbit* and *The Rainbow Fish.*

Introduction to Fantasy

What is fantasy? How can one identify a fantasy story? When we speak of just the word itself we are referring to an imagined dream or event. We also refer to the word when we are speaking of wishful thinking. When we refer to fantasy in the context of literature we are referring to stories that have certain definable elements that make the story unreal. There are many such elements. They vary from mythical beasts roaming an imagined world to natural settings in which animals take on human characteristics. There are recognizable conventions of fantasy, such as toys coming to life, tiny humans, articulate animals, imaginary worlds, magical powers, and time-warp tales. A story needs to possess only one of these features in order to be classified as fantasy. However, some great stories use a combination of fantasy elements. I tell my students simply this: a fantasy is any story in which at least one element cannot be found in our human world.

Why should we acknowledge this genre at all? Isn't it leading children into unreal dreams and causing confusion between what is real and what is not real? I don't think so. Just because a story contains animals that talk doesn't mean that the animals are not expressing the same emotions as fictional characters. Can't a child learn about love just as easily from *Charlotte's Web* as from *Old Yeller*? In fact, it seems to me it takes more imagination and a more open mind to believe that Charlotte had feelings and could show love than it does to respond to the connection between a boy and his dog. It certainly takes an open mind to believe that there is a Middle-earth and that dwarfs, elves and humans can bond and protect one another. I believe that fantasy not only does not lead children astray and cause them confusion, but that it actually broadens their mind and causes them to think beyond what we consider to be the limits of reality.

What Fantasy Isn't

After saying what fantasy is, we should take a minute and look at what it isn't. Fantasy is not any of the following genres: realistic fiction, historical fiction, or science fiction. Let's look at each of these genres briefly.

Realistic fiction is a story in which all the action, characters and setting could happen, it just didn't. In other words, the characters act like you and me and they live in places where you and I could live. Many times the

author has styled the character after someone he or she knows, but just made some minor changes. Realistic fiction has every quality of being true, except it isn't.

Historical fiction is a story that takes place in the past. In fact the setting of the story plays a major role in the action of the characters and the events that happen. The characters act and dress in the style and manner of real people of that time period. One distinction I make in defining historical fiction is that it can only be historical fiction if the setting of the story precedes the time when the story was written. In other words, a book that was written in 1950 about children in the 1950s does not become historical fiction in 2006. It will remain realistic fiction even though the setting and characters are now in the past.

Science Fiction: now here is where a distinction is truly necessary. Science fiction in some way involves a medical or technological advance that has not yet occurred, or a mode of advanced life that has not yet been discovered. But that is not to say that these things could not emerge in the future. We as humans are brilliantly coming up with new advances in medicine and surgical procedures. In the same realm we are also constantly coming up with advances in technology. If you had asked someone in 1930 if they thought there would be any way that one day everyone would not only have a telephone at home that can call anyone in the entire world, but also that virtually everyone would also have a cellular phone that had all the capabilities of a home phone, and more, and was something that could fit in the smallest of your jean pockets, they would have said it was impossible. That is what I mean by science fiction. It has not happened, but it could possibly happen.

Of course each of the above genres can be combined with one another to make various stories. What I wanted to point out, however, is that none of them can ever be combined with fantasy and still maintain its true character. Fantasy has this brilliant way of taking over the story line so that no other story line or elements of another genre can remain the central focus of the reader's attention.

Elements of Fantasy

We will start with the definition of fantasy and give some examples to the students. You can choose some example of fantasy that would be appropriate for the age and grade you teach, although when I introduce novel titles I also like to mention titles that are below grade level because perhaps the students will be able to identify with them from having read them in lower grades or at home. For example, I teach sixth grade so of course I mention titles like *Harry Potter* and *Redwall.* But I also mention titles like *Charlotte's Web* and *Curious George.*

When beginning this unit I will have my students take notes on fantasy motifs, but one could also provide a handout to them, especially since all of these motifs cannot be covered adequately in one class period. When we return to the lesson they can refer to their notes, and this will also be helpful when they write their fantasy picture story book at the end of this unit. Next we will discuss the elements of fantasy. There are seven basic motifs in fantasy: magic, otherworlds, universal themes, heroism, special character types, talking animals, and fantastic objects. Every fantasy story has some blend of the above elements. It's almost like a formula for writing fantasy. Students need to understand this formula and these elements in order to understand the basis of fantasy. Let's look at each of these elements separately.

Magic

Magic is the most basic element of fantasy, whether it's Harry Potter waving his wand or the Cheshire Cat's ability to disappear. In my opinion, magic is what draws a reader to fantasy. Magic is that in which charms, spells or rituals are used in order to produce a supernatural event. It's something that we humans are unable to perform, so we are intrigued by it. The following is a quote from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* when Alice first meets the Cheshire Cat.

> "You'll see me there," said the Cat, and vanished. Alice was not much surprised at this, she was getting so well used to queer things happening. While she was still looking at the place where it had been, it suddenly appeared again. (105)... "and I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy!" "All right," said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone. (106)

Otherworlds

Otherworlds are an imaginative creation by the author of a place that is nothing like earth. It is a completely imagined world where anything can happen and is only limited by the author's imagination. One thing I respect the most about fantasy writers is their ability to create from scratch an entirely imagined world where unreal things happen. The author has two choices when introducing an imaginary world to the reader. He or she can begin the book by locating all characters in this imagined world and never refer to what we know as the real world, as in Tolkien's Middle-earth. Another way for an author to introduce another world is to have the characters leave the world that we know and enter the new world, as in Lewis's Narnia. The characters can also have the ability to jump between two worlds.

Universal Themes

Universal themes are a must-have in a fantasy story. The most basic of these is good versus evil. There's always a good guy trying to fight for what is right against the powerful force of a bad guy. A great example of good vs. evil is *A Wrinkle in Time.* Other themes include love (*Pinocchio)*, friendship (*Charlotte's Web)* and perseverance in the face of danger (*Lord of the Rings)*.

Heroism

Heroism is something we all love. We love to see heroes save the day and become victorious over evil. Many times the heroes are ordinary people in difficult circumstances. They themselves don't know of their powers or abilities until they are called upon to perform heroic feats. It is that humble strength that we love to see. Some characters are guided by a larger, more powerful force—characters such as Frodo by Gandalf or Meg Murry by Mrs. Whatsit in *A Wrinkle in Time.* The following quote from *A Wrinkle in Time* exemplifies not only the idea that ordinary characters are called to do great things, but also that they always find the power within themselves that they had no idea was there.

"But I do understand...That is has to be me. It can't be anyone else." (195) And that was where IT made ITs fatal mistake, for as Meg said, automatically, "Mrs. Whatsit loves me; that's what she told me, that she loves me," suddenly she knew. She knew! Love. That was what she had that IT did not have. (207)

Special Character Types

Special character types are abundant in fantasies. Some examples are fairies, giants, ogres, dragons, witches, unicorns and centaurs. We love these characters because they are so different from what we find in our daily lives. However, a good author can shape the character in such a way that the reader has no problem believing that such a being could exist.

Talking Animals

The use of talking animals or anthropomorphism in fantasy stories can be used for several purposes. Sometimes the animals can talk to humans, as in *James in the Giant Peach* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Then sometimes the animals only talk amongst each other and are incapable of talking with humans, as in *Charlotte's Web, Redwall* or *Rabbit Hill*. The need and use for communication is prevalent in both types. Here we can also mention the use of talking toys, as in *The Velveteen Rabbit* or *The Indian in the Cupboard.*

Fantastic Objects

Fantastic objects help the characters perform their task. Many times these objects become almost a character in themselves. Where would Dorothy be without her slippers, Harry without his wand or Tinkerbelle without her dust? Many times characters need such an object to make themselves complete. The following quote from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* illustrates the idea that a hero needs an object and many times that object finds its way to the hero rather than vice versa.

> Harry took the wand. He felt a sudden warmth in his fingers. He raised the wand above his head…and a stream of red and gold sparks shot from the end…Mr. Ollivander fixed Harry with his pale stare. "I remember every wand I've ever sold…It is very curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother-why, its brother gave you that scar….The wand chooses the wizard, remember…I think we must expect great things from you, Mr. Potter….After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did great things- terrible, yes, but great" (85)

Each of these motifs makes fantasy the distinctive genre that it is. As you begin to introduce and use fantasy in your classroom it is important to teach these motifs and point out specific examples to the students.

Literature Circles for Elements of Fantasy

To review the lesson on elements of fantasy the class will be put into small groups. Each group will be given a fantasy picture book. For this unit I will suggest the following books: *Curious George, The Rainbow Fish, The Tub People, Jumanji*, *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble.* Each group will read their respective picture book and look for the elements of fantasy we have just learned. I suggest that the group fill out a report answering first the question of "Why is this a fantasy story?" Then they will fill in the information about magic, otherworlds, universal theme, heroism, special character types, talking animals, and fantastic objects. If any of these motifs do not apply to the story, that should be noted. Afterwards a short presentation to the class should be given. The presentation should include a short summary of the book as well as provide information about the specific aspects of the story that relate to fantasy.

Literary Elements

We all know that literary elements are the basis for teaching reading. I am specifically referring to plot, characterization, point of view, conflict, foreshadowing/flashback, tone/mood, and setting. For this unit we will incorporate these elements into the fantasy stories we are using. There are many more literary elements, especially when teaching high school, such as irony, figurative language, allegory, etc. I have chosen just these seven for this unit. You can remove any of these you wish when teaching this unit in your classroom or add more that you wish to cover also.

Plot

Plot is the sequence of events that applies to all fiction stories. It begins with Beginning Action. This is where the setting and characters are set up and introduced. Next is the Initiating Event. This is the event that is the catalyst to the entire story. It begins the conflict. Then we see the Rising Action. This is the bulk of the story line. All the events leading to the Climax are found in the Rising Action. Then we come to the Climax. Here the conflict is resolved and all the tenseness of the story comes to a peak. Next is the Falling Action. After the Climax is revealed the Falling Action begins to wrap up the story and loose ends are tied up. Finally there is the Resolution. This is the conclusion of the action and the end of the story.

Most stories used in the classroom are fiction stories that have a plot or story line. It's important to illustrate this to the students and make the differentiation between elements that belong to fiction and that those that belong to non-fiction. When I introduce plot for the first time I use a picture book, for reasons of brevity. We make a plot outline together as a class so the students can see each and every part of the story. Since this unit is focusing on fantasy, I would recommend using *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* or *The Velveteen Rabbit.* As you begin to use novels, then you can presume their understanding of "plot" in the discussion.

Characterization

Major characters are the basis for the story. They are mentioned the most and have the most influence on the outcome of the story. As major characters you have the protagonist and the antagonist. The protagonist is essentially the good guy and the main character. The antagonist is the character or force that is against the protagonist, essentially the bad guy. Major characters are always round or dynamic. This means that they change and grow as the story moves along.

Minor characters are there to support the major characters. They are not necessarily essential to the story; however they do provide support and background. The loss of a minor character does not necessarily change the outcome of the story. Minor characters are usually flat or static. This means that they do not change through the course of the story. They lack depth in character.

In *A Wrinkle in Time*, for example, Meg Murry would be the major character and protagonist. We can see her transformation from the beginning of the story to the end. She has depth and the story most certainly needs her to continue on. The antagonist would be IT. IT is essential to the story and provides the opposing force to Meg. Minor characters would be Meg's mother and in some respects her father, as her father is important to the story, but does not change as a result of the action of the story.

Point of View

Point of view is the view from which the story is told. There is first person, which is when the story is told through the eyes of one character who is the narrator. That character can reveal his or her thoughts but cannot go into the mind of any other character. The word "I" is frequently used in first person.

Third person has three different aspects. First there is third person objective. We do not know the thoughts of any characters, and only the action and conversation is revealed to the reader through the narrator. Then there is third person limited. This means that the narrator is an outsider who can see into the mind of only one character. *The Indian in the Cupboard* is told through the viewpoint of Omri, but he is not the narrator. Finally there is third person omniscient, in which the narrator has access to the minds of all characters. All thoughts and actions of the characters are revealed, and sometimes even the thoughts of the author are revealed, thoughts that none of the characters are aware of. *TheLion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* is an example of this point of view. We are able to follow the thoughts of each of the characters, especially Lucy and Edmund.

Conflict

Conflict is the essence of the plot. It is the major problem that the story line is trying to resolve. There are four types of conflict which will be discussed below.

Man vs. man is where the conflict involves one character against another. In *James and the Giant Peach* James has conflict with his two aunts. They are despicable and wholly negligent towards him. In *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* we see a conflict between Aslan and the White Witch that resembles a man vs. man conflict. However, if we look at the story in a broader sense and see Aslan as God, then it becomes a man vs. society conflict. Man vs. self is a conflict within a character and his or her thoughts. In many parts of *Harry Potter* we find Harry struggling with himself. He is constantly balancing the boy he has always been with the newfound wizard he is becoming. Man vs. society is a struggle between a character's thoughts or action and what is expected of him or her in the society in which he or she lives. *Pinocchio* is a good example of this conflict because he always finds himself going against what society expects of him. Finally there is man vs. nature where the character struggles against natural forces. *A Wrinkle in Time* could be an example of this—if in fact we view IT as natural.

Foreshadowing/ Flashback

Foreshadowing is a hint at what will happen later in the story. Foreshadowings are not always recognized until later in the story when the reader learns something and realizes that a hint of it was given earlier. But in most cases foreshadowing is recognized, and raises the interest of the reader through suspense and encourages them to continue reading.

Flashback is a remembering of an event that happened previously. Sometimes the event was already revealed in the story. However, sometimes a flashback is about an event that was not revealed to the reader and fills in the plot gaps the reader may have had.

Tone/ Mood

Tone is the way in which the author expresses his or her attitude toward a subject. This is a very difficult literary element to teach. The easiest tone to recognize would be humor. However, the author also could be feeling bitterness, joy, resentment, seriousness, pessimism or optimism. In *James and the Giant Peach* it

seems the author uses humor to explain various situations. He uses humor to explain the deaths of Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker. He also makes a humorous situation when he introduces the Cloud-Men making hail, snow and rainbows.

Mood is what the reader feels while reading. It is the atmosphere created by the piece of writing. These feelings are achieved through the use of characters, setting, language and images. A good writer can evoke a strong mood within the reader that affects the way a story is read. *Pinocchio* gives us a constant feeling of frustration. We cannot understand why Pinocchio won't do the right thing. *A Wrinkle in Time* gives us a feeling of mystery. We are intrigued by this adventure Meg is having and also a little confused by it.

Setting

Setting is the place and time in which a story happens. The place can be as broad as Asia or as specific as a child's closet. The setting can also shift as the story moves along. Time is when the story is happening. Again, it can be as broad as the Civil War or as specific as 3 PM. The setting is usually revealed early in the story. Sometimes a setting is simply a backdrop to the story and is just there. Other times the setting may act as an influence upon the action of the story.

The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe is set in two places, Narnia and the professor's house in the English countryside, the latter being the non-fantasy world. The time period is World War II, which is significant in that it gives the reason why the children must leave home. *Pinocchio* is set in Italy in the late 1800s. The background of Italy does affect some of the dialogue and language, but overall it is not significant. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* obviously takes place in Wonderland. This non-existent land is the basis and cause for all the lunacy that appears in the novel. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is one of the settings for *Harry Potter*, the other being the English muggle house of the Dursleys. Of course none of the story could take place without Hogwarts because that is where Harry meets his best friends and his enemy Voldemort. The major and significant setting for *James and the Giant Peach* is the peach, which travels from London to New York City. All the adventure takes place inside the giant peach. Of course the magical setting of *The Lord of the Rings* is Middle-earth. This setting is significant because only a place like this could be the home for the hobbits, the elves, the dwarfs, the orcs, and the like.

Literature Circles for Literary Elements

After the literary elements have been taught, the students will again go back to the literature circles. They will be given the same book as before, but this time they will be looking for the literary elements previously discussed. Again, a report will be made providing the information for that book. Another short presentation to the class will be given relaying the information about the literary elements found in the story.

Creating A Fantasy Picture Story Book

After we have studied the elements of fantasy and read some fantasy stories, the students will write their own fantasy story. This will be done in partners or groups. The final product will be an illustrated fantasy story that contains one or more of the elements we learned at the beginning of this unit.

Students will decide what type of fantasy they would be interested in writing. Will it be one with mythical creatures, one where humans have magical powers or one where animals are like humans? They must decide if the imaginary world is the only world in the story or if the characters move from the human world into the imaginary world. They need to choose a main character, whether it be male, female or animal. What do they want this character to do? What challenges will this character be faced with? What, if any, powers does this character have and what is the fantastic object that they will use? What kind of villain will the book have and what will its powers be?

The students should have about a week to write and illustrate this story. Details like the length, type of binding, etc. can be left to the teacher. We all have students of different ages and abilities, so this unit can be adapted to your classroom needs. A good way to keep the students focused is to provide them a checklist of things that need to be covered in the story. For example, each of the elements of fantasy needs to be checked as being used or not used. Also, a list of the literary elements needs to be addressed and noted where it occurs in the story. So let's say the rough draft of the story is turned in and the paragraphs or pages are numbered. On the checklist the students would note where in the story, page or paragraph, it provides the setting or the universal theme is revealed. Also they would note where the use of point of view is revealed and where the conflict is noted. It would be a way for the teacher to check that the students are understanding the assignment in incorporating the elements learned properly. Also this is a good way to keep the students focused on using and applying the knowledge they gained from the lesson. These books will definitely be something to display and something the students will be proud of. Be sure to expose the students to many fantasy picture books in addition to those used for the literature circle. It would be good if they could refer to some of the books as they are working to get ideas. This is especially helpful for the struggling readers who may not know where to begin when writing an original story.

Extension Activity

I would suggest creating extended literature circles in which the groups read a fantasy novel. I have suggested and referenced many in this unit. I would, however, enforce that a student could not be in a literature circle for a novel he or she has already read. The purpose of the literature circles would be to expose the students to new novels as well as provide practice for them in identifying all the fantasy and literary elements learned in this unit.

Conclusion

Writing this unit was very exciting for me. That old saying "like a kid in a candy store" definitely applied to me as I was researching for this unit. I just really love fantasy and I was ecstatic to be able to write a curriculum unit that taught the reading skills I need to teach but also used stories that I love to read. I know many of my students love fantasy as much as I do. Hopefully by incorporating literature that they are interested in they will be more apt to learn the concepts presented.

As with any curriculum outline, you can modify for the needs of your class. I tried to reference several different fantasy books at varying reading levels so teachers could adapt to their classroom. You, of course, may have some favorite stories that were not mentioned in this unit. I'm sure that by the time I teach this unit a year or two, I will be using some new stories. That's the great thing about literature; there are great, great classics out there that need not be overlooked. Then too, new stories come out every year, and some of those go on to become classics. My hope is that this unit will be versatile enough to last in your classroom from year to year.

Lesson Plans

Lesson Plan 1

Objective: Students will understand the elements of fantasy.

Materials: Any variety of fantasy novels and picture books that is appropriate for your class level. I have referenced several previously in this unit. Also, a handout or report to be completed by the literature circle group concerning the various fantasy motifs.

Activities: The teacher will present the seven motifs of fantasy, being sure to read examples from various literature sources. Students will either be given a handout of the motifs and definitions or take notes on their own. After all seven motifs have been presented the students will form literature circles and will read a selected fantasy picture story book. Each group will complete a short report on the story and what motifs were used, citing specific examples. Each group will present to the class.

Lesson Plan 2

Objective: Students will understand several literary elements.

Materials: Notes on literary elements, a variety of fantasy picture story books. Optional: a handout containing this information for students. Also, a handout or report to be completed by the literature circle group concerning the various literary elements.

Activities: The teacher will present the information about the literary elements, being sure to give examples where possible. Students will either take notes on the lecture or will be given a handout to review. After all literary elements have been discussed, students will return to their literature circles and re-read their picture book looking for examples of each of the literary elements presented. Each group will complete a short report

on their findings citing specific examples where possible.

Lesson Plan 3

Objective: Students will create an original fantasy picture story book.

Materials: Various fantasy picture books to be used as references, white drawing paper, markers or crayons, some type of binding chosen by the teacher, checklist of requirements for the story.

Activities: Students choose partners or small groups with which to work. Each group will create an original fantasy picture story book that contains illustrations. The students must include several of the motifs of fantasy as well as several of the literary devices. Each group will complete a checklist provided by the teacher of what is to be included. Students will complete the checklist citing examples from their story. After all stories have been created each group will read their original picture story book to the class.