



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2016 Volume III: "Over the Rainbow": Fantasy Lands, Dream Worlds, and Magic Kingdoms

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## **Magical Multi-Culti Yellow Brick Road Realism: Using Imagination to Find Reality**

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### **Introduction and rationale**

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"Imagination is more important than knowledge." - Albert Einstein

For several days after Muhammed Ali's recent death, I found and heard Ali maxims everywhere. Because one fraction of my mind is always percolating something for my seminar or unit, this one stayed with me: "The man who has no imagination has no wings." I thought about how rich his imagination must have been. Then I thought about how grounded in reality my students are. Burdened with it, really. Their lives are so survival-oriented and rooted in immediacy and basic needs that the imaginative realms are lost to them. My units that have come from previous seminars have ambitiously addressed issues of social justice or the effects of trauma on literacy and writing skill—the realities of my classroom. But what if Ali is right? If not cultivating one's imagination is equal to sentencing him or her to a life of predictability—which in the case of many of my students is one of recidivism and prison or blue collar jobs that make ends meet at best. Can the ability to suspend one's belief in fiction transfer to one's life, goals, dreams? Can the ability to buy into fantasy and the imaginative at least provide escape from the drudgery of a struggling student's day or life?

My students tend to seek music, television, and movies that reflect comfortably or validate their own lives, it appears to me. Why do they really select what they do? Why do they avoid certain genres like fantasy and science fiction? How do I bridge their lives to fantasy worlds? I've had discussions over the years with my students about why many of them don't like Harry Potter, for example, or why some so resisted *Divergent* when we read it school-wide. They don't "get it." I've been depending on relatively safe selections the last few years, assuming we have enough literary struggles in the classroom without fighting to defend what we read more than usual. Still, I have to believe, despite the research I've done for previous units, that my students are more complex than the book selections we may put in front of them, with characters that look like and even may act like them sometimes. They love Walter Dean Myers and Sharon Draper—so do I—but their worlds must be stretched to include more. This unit brings the opportunity to indulge in works less grounded in the rough, real world. If Mohammed Ali is correct, my work is cut out for me.

The text and art for this unit were chosen first for their ability to unsettle my readers. Some are dark; *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is certainly not. They will be surprised by each, for different reasons. Two other things hold them tenuously together. First is their ability to de-familiarize—to put students beyond their

expectations. Second, they all have transplanted protagonists—some more literally than others. Third, they fall into four universal dramatic categories that were introduced to us in our seminar: the journey, the standoff, the decision, and the discovery. Darker short stories, both mid-length, are *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* by Gabriel García Márquez and *Bloodchild* by Octavia Butler. The last is an installation piece by Kara Walker: *The Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*.

## Classroom context

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My school, which meets a primary probation requirement, was created to serve adjudicated youth. We are small and family-like, serving this next year between 60 and 80 students at a time. Turnover is high, so I may see closer to 120 students over the course of the year. We are a therapeutic, not punitive program. Our first goal is to keep students from re-offending. However, we are responsible for meeting state and federal mandates. Often, though, we first have to teach them how to “do school” again and to reintroduce them to society as productive, engaged citizens who are on the other side of the social justice system. This is the last stop for most of them academically.

My students are amazing young people who have endured struggles that many cannot imagine. Their lives, at least temporarily, have been defined by situations beyond their control, especially those that come out of generational poverty, physical and mental trauma, and adjudicated family members. Many have living situations that are non-traditional, to say the least, and are often inadequate or temporary. They are between 14 and 20 years old, often more than a year behind in credits and skills. Usually they have been out of the classroom more than in it over the last few years. Often they are substance abusers and have poor sleep habits and poor nutrition. Many also face the problems that go along with being a minority in a very segregated city. These collected conditions have significant negative influences on the quality and quantity of learning and cause some to miss a great deal of school. Interventions for behavioral problems or social service appointments will also interrupt classroom time for some students.

## Content objectives

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Students will read works written “in the subjunctive” for the opportunity of rich comprehension practice. I anticipate resistance, but I also speculate that readers could be comforted by the presence of familiar themes and plot structures and be challenged by new ones to them, like allegory. I was happy to find confirmation: (Carl Smith) confirms that application of “similar skills and strategies” to multiple genres “promotes cognitive development.”<sup>1</sup> In fantasy or science fiction students may do deeper work towards comprehension as the reader stretches visualization skills with unknown settings or characters. Another virtue of fantastic stories with their de-familiarized settings and characters might be that students may see more clearly for the stark contrast to the usual selections. They are ready to challenge classroom texts, expecting the characters or situations to be “too white,” or “too bougie.” I realize that we can’t just throw an unusual new genre at our students. They need to be prepared and empowered.

Students do not read or write in a vacuum. The more they read, the more they become aware of the craft in

the writing of others. New tropes and prose forms become more familiar, and eventually they influence students' own writing, either consciously or subconsciously. It works the other way, as well. As they become more purposeful writers, they appreciate and understand the intentions of other writers. This improves comprehension and appreciation as they read. This unit capitalizes on those connections by encouraging students to see those relationships in their fantastical reading and writing activities.

To these ends, I have four more academic goals and a few non-cognitive ones. As mentioned above, I will begin by preparing and empowering my readers. First, I want students to learn and apply frameworks such as Freytag's pyramid and universal themes for stories that can apply to other genres of literature if they have not already. Second, in our seminar we worked with four main story types: the journey, the standoff, the discovery, and the decision. We'll cover the execution of at least three of these.

Third, students will write a fiction narrative that is grounded in the imaginative and that depends on literary skills acquired in the unit. These will be grounded in themes relevant to my students' lives. Finally, they will also improve their analysis skills of prose and image. Alternatively, in response to my research on multimodal literacy in at-risk students (below), they may create other varieties of work to show understanding, through technology, manual arts, or performance.

Less measurable objectives for my students include increased appreciation of more magical genres of literature as well as increased motivation for reading that may accompany it. Hopefully they will find themselves and their realities in the fantasies we explore. And maybe, just maybe, we can grow our imaginative thinking skills.

## The imagination crisis

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Joe Roach's seminar explored "utopias and wonderful but impossible places" and the works that share them. Characters from Dorothy Gale to Peter Pan to Puck were our tour guides and their stories our maps. One world which we inhabited was that of the subjunctive—that tense of the "what if," the imagined or conditional. While the subjunctive mood is no longer much-used in the English language, its literary possibilities are endless. What if a cyclone carries Dorothy away from Kansas? What if Wendy and her brothers were to fly with Peter to Neverland? What if Oberon were to decide to interfere with the mortals, and what if Puck were to screw it up? The charming nature of the content was alluring. I was excited about the fantastical nature of the texts; I was also acutely aware that my students might not be. With a few exceptions, they have not appreciated the clever word play or settings in Harry Potter or felt comfortable in the futuristic setting of *Divergent*.

My research stemming from the seminar attempted to explore why perceived challenges of imagination exist commonly across our classrooms, what the consequences in the classroom and students' lives might be, and what a teacher can do about it while engaging students in meaningful and appropriate academic work.

In seminar we learned the term *paracosm*, of which a common definition is "a prolonged fantasy world invented by children," that "can have a definite geography and language and history."<sup>2</sup> (Wordnet definition) It is the kind of imagination we assume our students have as younger children and which fuels their play. In fact, there is a difference in this psychological context between fantasy and imagination as explained by

Serena Konkin.<sup>3</sup> This distinction is relevant to classrooms like mine where trauma is likely. The “imaginal instinct halts after trauma, whereupon fantasy takes over.” Children can flee to their imaginations to escape physical and mental unhealthy and traumatic reality. “A kind of imaginal muteness occurs, with the creative processes now only in service to defense rather than meaning.” On the other hand, imagination is a creative source, allowing us to consider alternative emotions and outcomes, including “unicorns and future events.” It is the source of creative design, solutions, and art, of every “made object.”<sup>4</sup> (Brahic) Research suggests that paracosm in childhood is associated with positive outcomes on cognitive development as well as adult success in a variety of fields.<sup>5</sup> (Bernstein 421) While certainly not the only measure of adult success, we can assume that the lack of exercised imagination may lead to less success. Those young people have had the benefit of working out a variety of things. “Childhood imagination can be seen both as a way to safely explore the real world and as a dress rehearsal for adult imagination,” arguably some of the most important uses of a child’s imagination.<sup>6</sup> (Brahic) Paracosm as a specific aspect of a child’s developing imagination relates, I think, to the genres we might associate with it, like fantasy and science fiction and our students’ willingness to read them. However, I do not think the term has to be restrictive to young children and their fantasy worlds. Our own students can create their own paracosms, re-make their own realities, and explore their imaginations now, as well.

It turns out that this kind of creative imagination, as measured by a standard creative quotient (CQ) score has been declining among school children across the country since 1990. In addition to the more personal obstructions individual students face in cultivating imaginative thought, nationally our school systems, curricula, and dependence on objective assessment have also been cited as culprits.<sup>7</sup> (Bronson).

This is a common problem in many of our urban classrooms—as verified by those represented in our seminar, from 1<sup>st</sup> grade through high school. We perceive our own students to be challenged with restricted imagination in higher concentrations. What I see often lacking in my classroom adheres to Keiichi Takaya’s definition of imagination, when “a person has the ability and tendency to think of things in a way that is not tightly constrained by the actual, such as conventions, cultural norms, one’s habitual thought, and information given by others.”<sup>8</sup> (Takaya/imag bk 23) We know intuitively that restricted imagination and curiosity have negative effects on success in life and the classroom. We see cleverness and creativity in the execution of their social media presence, but the content and message are startlingly similar from student to student, representing an urban vernacular with a set and shared set of values. Watching other young people’s parking lot fights over and over is a preferred use of free time at school. I perceive a false ceiling that limits curiosity and creativity. Limitations in their learning, curiosity, and imaginative play and exploration persist through their teen years. While their lives are measured out in small screens, the world they will grow into is all the time becoming more complex and demanding.

## Solutions

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I set out to find the innovative, research-based practices to tell me how to lead my students to uncover their latent imaginations, to break through the glass ceilings of their realities. I was struck by this statement about how literature education has trended over the last few decades: “We have thought too much in terms of a will which submits and not enough of an imagination which opens up.”<sup>9</sup> (imag book 78) This paradigm shift reflects recent trends in American education and testing. In *Teaching and Learning Outside the Box: Inspiring*

*Imagination across the Curriculum* I found helpful theory about leading students in the ELA classroom through literature to deeper understanding of literature and self, and which validated, to me, the use of text selection here.

### **An hermeneutic approach**

Metaphor is necessary for struggling readers to bridge the literal and the figurative where meaning resides, as created by the reader. The imagination depends on images to keep meaning real, un-invisible. "The visual image is the moment when the verbal turns sensible. . . where sense and image are held together in an intuitive manner."<sup>10</sup> (imag book 78-9) The melding of the verbal and non-verbal link the intuitive and conceptual, forming "a creative tension between expression and interpretation that can be helpful in the ELA classroom."<sup>11</sup> (book 79) The suggested verbal and non-verbal, hermeneutic approach to looking at literature breaks from an "objective analysis of texts, nor to the subjective existential analysis of the authors of texts"; rather, it focuses on the worlds created by the reader from the text and author.<sup>12</sup> (79) We want to shift from what the reader does to the text to what the text can do to or for the reader. For example, Madoc-Jones explains that questions we often use, such as "What do you think of the text?" or "How does it make you feel?" set pre-existing limitations or potential distractions for interpretive outcomes and use of the linguistic imagination. He suggests that once the reader is familiar enough with the text, he should instead seek to find how he has changed from the reading experience of that text.<sup>13</sup> (82) To become so familiar with the text, the reader must engage individually with it and interact with its words and images. In my own classroom, I know I have probably discouraged questions or interpretations that seemed odd or irrelevant but were grounded in a student's original interaction with the text based on her personal experience and culture. By doing so I possibly closed the door to a student's engagement with a story or poem, or stifled the urge to imagine or the ability of the student to find his/her reality in the literature. How often do I or other teachers miss opportunities to cultivate imaginative thought by neglecting to leave space for it in our habitual teaching practice?

A literary text more than an informational text lends itself to richer interaction by the reader. Visual detail persists and is significant throughout the text. Reality as rendered by a fictional text is open to more varied and personal interpretations. Fantastic or especially imaginative texts and art works further remove readers from predictable or expected interpretations by themselves or their teachers. Characters, settings, and plots also defy literary expectations. The gap between the intuitive and the conceptual is greater, but the bridge is hopefully stronger as students work to interact with new language and detail. The three written texts for this unit share the characteristics of graphic, sustained description and de-familiarizing fiction elements.

### **Multimodal literacy**

Andrew Schofield also emphasizes the use of "multimodal forms of representation and meaning making."<sup>14</sup> (123) Literary understandings are found through varied kinds of texts and media, and "school-based practices need to be inclusive of a broad range of students, cultures, and text formats. To this end, moving from text to 3-D, multi-layered installation piece, Kara Walker's *Subtlety* invites the students to mix language and image to find meaning and reality in a different kind of "text," one that more closely represents the historical culture of many of my students. On the flip side, students might select their own modes for demonstrating their meaning making of text. For example, as one of Schofield's student's interest began to grow in *The Whale Rider*, the teacher, knowing the student well, gave him a piece of cedar with carving tools. The student asked his teacher how a story could be told in a woodcarving or how a woodcarving could relay a story then worked diligently through symbols and images to ultimately demonstrate his own meaning made of the novel.

Through his deeper engagement he was able to make links to theme and other literary elements he likely would not have otherwise. Schofield's students and mine share many academic, social, and legal challenges.

### **Grounded in structure**

I realize that every student will not be initially skeptical about the nature of the unit. Some will have happy childhood memories of the Oz film and positive expectations. Some will be curious. Yet the central problem of the unit remains. Motivation comes from interest, and I've described several reasons the unit could be a challenge. After going to such lengths to de-familiarize my students, I also have to provide stability. As mentioned previously, students must be prepared and empowered by with the use of easy-to-trace elements with which I know they will be comfortable, but which also have value to them as readers.

Freytag's Pyramid is a familiar plot outline with which most ELA teachers are familiar, at least in a simple form. Gustav Freytag's pyramid has distinctive indicators along a rising and falling plot line with climax at its apex. The stages from beginning to end of a complete plot are exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, moment of last suspense, dénouement. Variations exist, as well. The model is easy to trace through commonly known works like Disney movies and children's stories. While we read some strange things together, we'll be able to follow dependable and predictable plot elements among them.

The four main story types we discussed in our seminar are another foundation for solid story reading and writing. *Oz* is the journey, and we can study it also as an allegory; *Bloodchild* is the decision; *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* is a sort of standoff (mixed with other forms), and *Subtlety* is the discovery, in a way. Like Freytag's Pyramid, they are easy to find in stories they already know.

Finally, all four works have transplanted protagonists, to the sense that the term applies. As alternative school students who have been often outside of the norm in other ways, mine should identify to some extent with these characters. This is the final grounding frame for the four works.

## **The unit**

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The unit will take place over three weeks-four weeks, allowing for time to collaborate on a larger project at the end. My classes are multi-aged, but I intend to use this unit with my 10<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> grade students as closely as possible. This may mean one class; it may mean three, depending on the make-up of the student body at the time.

### **Genres**

Each of these definitions is distilled from Harmon and Holmon's *A Handbook to Literature*. There are similarities among them, especially their extra-imaginative elements.

Fantasy: There is in this genre a "conscious breaking free from reality." More specifically, it takes place in an unreal world or non-existent one. Characters may be fantastical, incredible characters. Fantasy may be written for reasons ranging from "whimsy" to serious social criticism. The term may be inclusive to science fiction or utopian/dystopian fiction.

Magical Realism: A more modern and specific form of fantasy, in magical—or magic—realism “the frame or surface of the work may be conventionally realistic,” but contain elements such as “the supernatural, myth, dream, fantasy” which distort the nature of the real.

Science fiction: “Scientific facts, assumptions, or hypotheses form the basis” of these adventures that take place often in the future, beyond the earth, or in “other dimensions of time or space.” I would add that themes in science fiction are often very human and/or cautionary about the outcomes of human progress.

Installation art: a non-literary term, installation art is three dimensional art that for its duration occupies space that may itself be part of the art or its meaning.

### **Other literary and art applications**

Allegory: A work of literature, or part of it, in which characters, setting, and events represent parallel meanings, often abstract qualities.

Installation art: A non-literary form, installation art is three-dimensional and may invite exploration from all sides or even participation from the viewer. Often its setting has significance.

### **Texts and art works**

The high turnover rate of our students requires special attention to lengths of texts and projects. Shorter pieces allow transient students to complete or catch up without frustration. This unit is intentionally based on shorter works and visual media to reach students who may enter the classroom at any point. Text selection comes from previous research on best texts for at-risk, unmotivated readers and new research on reaching the same readers through works of fantasy and imaginative fancy. It is intended to challenge them academically and emotionally—especially to the end that they may find a sense of escape and entertainment in works that bring them horror, joy, and curiosity.

A key text will be *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (L. Frank Baum). The novel offers possibilities for unsettling students, who think they know the story from the 1939 movie or *The Wiz*. When the seminar was first introduced, I knew I wanted to use *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. I assume that most of my students have seen the film at least once. It has been ubiquitous in pop culture for almost eighty years. I also can be fairly certain that none of my students has read the original text. One first venture into the unexpected may come from the discovery that the movie has deviated from the novel. Assuming they have seen the movie at least once, transient students can at least step in mid-read knowing most characters and a basic plot. However, we have new characters and settings, including the Quadlings, the china country, the fighting trees, and the field mice. Green glasses and a golden cap complicate the story. Each main character has his or her specific resolution, complicating and extending the book’s resolution. After introducing Freytag’s pyramid and briefly tracing what we remember from the movie, I will lead close readings of the two settings with which we begin the book, Kansas and Oz. There is very purposeful language describing the two. The word gray is used at least nine times in the first two pages, for example. I want them to see up front that we’ll be using textual support and close reading throughout. Along the way we’ll do visual analysis of screen shots of the film and compare/contrast them to the novel, if only to keep them visually engaged. Throughout, we’ll continue to trace the plot elements on our large-scale pyramid on the wall.

The original movie poster announced the movie as “the happiest movie ever made”; I still hope that *Oz* will have the ability to be a gratifying read decades later with a modern and more cynical audience of teenagers.

Other Oz pieces may find their way in. It is possible that we may add *The Wiz*, time permitting, to see variations on the same journey, which is one of the four story types they'll chose from when they create their own. In seminar we read critical interpretations of the text, including exploring the conscious and the unconscious, the book as cultural parable, and one looking at the political-historical context of the novel. We have the option to discuss the last briefly and maybe look at excerpts. Their own narratives have the opportunity to be richer with consideration of their own historical or cultural contexts. Their realities are defined by many factors.

Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild" is an unsettling short story taking place on an extra-solar planet where humans (Terrans) have been allowed to settle on preserves by local civilized creatures (T'Lics). They find a symbiotic relationship in which the T'Lics—unable to host their own eggs—need Terrans for hosts, and Terrans need T'Lics for their land and accommodations. The protagonist Gan is a young man who is to be the host for his family's close T'Lic and is exposed to the gory and painful operation that produces a batch of grubby worms who will grow up to be T'Lic. One reason Butler wrote this story was to explore male childbirth. (Another was to face her fear of botflies.) I like this story for its total impossibility but adaptable conflicts. After tracing the plot on Freytag's pyramid, we'll work on narrative voice by modeling writing and reading for voice. We will use close reading practices and finding supporting text in our search for theme. We'll get out our art supplies for activities that bridge language and image to lead to comprehension and new realities.

Butler is an African American author—unusual in a genre dominated by white men, and we will explore her life briefly. The story is race-neutral, but some of the problems in the story are very relatable to my students, yet turned upside down. Males give birth. The "creatures" tend to the humans in a manner not unlike we do our pets, but to a more complicated end. The protagonist deals with conflicts of affection and loyalty in an unusual relationship that might mirror that of a non-traditional household represented in my classroom. I predict my students will be a little freaked out but will have plenty to discuss. They cannot *not* be engaged by this story.

*A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* is a well-known example of magical realism by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. An elderly man with wings like an angel's arrives in a small fishing community on what is probably the Columbian coast. Here, poverty and religion are two driving forces. The poor family he "adopts" has an ill infant. As if in answer to his illness, the old man with decaying wings appears in the child's family's courtyard. He is celebrated then dismissed, bringing alternately wealth and shame then finally disgust and fatigue to his host family. One spring after the child is better, the man (angel?) also begins to gain strength and grow new feathers. He takes off without ceremony. The story, though, is very much about the family and the community. This is another visually stimulating story for its rich descriptions, especially of the old man. With this story, we will explore the mix of the real and unreal and the possibilities of writing or creating magical realism, which takes a greater suspension of disbelief, I think, than pure fantasy.

The final work is Kara Walker's installation *The Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*. I had discovered Kara Walker before this unit, and when my seminar leader suggested her as a pairing with *Kindred*, I was committed. But *Kindred* was not the correct choice, nor were Kara Walker's cut-outs, which are too explicit for my high school classroom. In my looking more deeply into Walker, though, I found her installation piece *The Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*. A giant, almost glowing white, mostly sugar sphinx fills the center of the soon-to-be demolished Domino sugar refining plant in Brooklyn. But the figure is not a sphinx; she is a sugar picker of African descent. The installation's layers of meaning parallel the layers of sugar from the construction of the central figure to the decades-old molasses still seeping from the building's crevices. The title word, subtlety, by the way, was the quaint name for carved sugar sculptures used as edible table decorations for the rich.<sup>15</sup> (Times/Smith) The subject is, as in the other works, a transplanted protagonist, and



we see her reality through layers of fantastic artistic expression.

From the installation sponsor's website: "An homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant." This was Kara Walker's first large installation piece, its end coinciding with the demolition of the Domino Sugar refining plant in Brooklyn in 2014. We'll watch the Art 21 video of the creation of the installation which includes interviews with the artist and traces the creation of the piece. The Creative Time webpage for the installation has links to images, stories, and information about slave history in the sugar trade that may be of interest to other teachers. To end the unit, I want us to create our own installation piece after selecting an issue they want to feature—a reality, remade with their imaginations.

## Conclusion

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Going into this seminar and into the writing of this unit, I thought I'd find a magic bullet, a trick of some kind to help my students tap their hidden imaginations. What I realized along the way is that this does not exist, but that by conscious practice teachers can provide opportunities that do encourage students to use creative faculties they did not know they have, while also building literacy skills and experiencing rigor. It was important to me, though, that the literature and art in this unit be different and unexpected experiences for them, both for the nature of the works and how we approached them. We have taught our students to have superficial dreams about careers and futures, but maybe we've sold them short on the kind of dreams they may have. We work hard to prepare them for jobs, college, the predictable life, but we can also open the door to a little fantasy and magic and escape from these things. There are solutions to life's problems to be found here, as well. The old man in the Marquez story has wings. And while not glamorous, he has a subtle power and mystery and magic. As Ali tells us, without imaginations, we can have no wings.

## Strategies

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### Student work

I want student work to show that they have begun to be able to move back and forth between their reality and their and others' versions of fantasy. In addition to close reading and annotation, and viewing exercises and tracing plot structures and other literary elements, we will exercise our own imaginations in two planned final assignments. The first is an individual written example of imaginative fiction. The second is a collaborative piece of installation art based on an issue of the students' choice. The first assignments will be preparing students for the final two. Along the way, in trying to get students to interact richly with the works, I will also encourage them to follow their own questions and interests to let the works open up to them and to display their understanding in methods that make sense to them. The strategies here are intended to tie in to the hermeneutic and multimodal literacy theories of making meaning from literature explained above.

## Visual literacy

We are bombarded with imagery all day. It makes sense that we include critical “seeing” along with our critical reading. We know the importance of this multimodal literacy for struggling students. My students, especially those who struggle, are very responsive to still and moving pictures. Image fills in gaps in understanding and reinforces strategies for analysis. Some see form or tone in image more clearly than in text. They learn to slow down and see details as they are not inclined to do with text. The learned skills can translate to finding meaning in text or other forms of media and provide a sort of hermeneutic approach to understanding. My students are often more comfortable working collaboratively around an image than a text, as well. A good starting place for teachers seeking information on visual literacy is the Visual Thinking Strategies website; of course, there are countless others that are easy to find and tailor to specific lessons.

If a film is an unceasing series of images, are some more valuable than others? What is the cumulative effect of a scene? We will apply tone and mood words, of which there are dozens of lists online, to isolated scenes and search for details that define the selected scenes. We will look from the audience’s point of view as well as the characters’. What does the filmmaker do to get us to experience a specific emotion? We’ll move also from the objective details to the more subjective interpretations then analysis with leading questions and graphic organizers. In addition to still shots and maybe short clips from *Oz*, we’ll also look at images from the installation of *Subtlety*.

## Model writing

*Bloodchild* lends its way to deeper consideration of tone, a constant struggle in my classroom now and in my AP classes in the past. They rarely can identify it. Less likely even are they to write it into their own work. However, my students tend to use limited emotion and tone words in their own vocabularies. Not only does building this vocabulary enrich their understanding of the text, it also does so for their own experiences. These words can fill in the space between image and meaning. The associated activity encourages students play with the text by speaking and seeing. Butler frequently wraps dialog in action, potentially clarifying a scene in which the dynamic is unexpected and probably confusing to a reader who doesn’t know to be expecting it in this new genre. For example, “‘Not for anything,’ T’Gatoi said, stroking my mother’s shoulders, toying with her long, graying hair.” And she guides the dialogue with description that facilitates tone: “‘Lien, can you stand up?’ T’Gatoi asked suddenly.” The action of the strategy is students modeling pieces of text rich with tone and dialogue but emulating some of Butler’s methods. The intended outcomes are closer readings, deeper connections with tone and character, and more vivid writing of dialogue in the students’ own works.

## Visual reading

This second multi-modal strategy should be a nice break for some and a very effective reading strategy for my more struggling readers. Drawing key elements or characters early in a text forces a reader to create mental images. The first benefit is that the words take on meaning. The second is that the reader now has an image to do the action in her head through the rest of the story. I have learned that many of my readers are not able yet to visualize a story mentally as it plays out on the page, so they miss the visual hooks that help them retain the words and information they read. Forcing image works for setting, character, and action. After drawing the images as they see them, they can turn around and describe them again, this time with their own word choices, adding layered and more individualized understanding of the scene or character. How are their word choices different from the writer’s? What is the text image saying to them?

## Activities

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### Anatomy of a frame

Why do some of us remember 1939 film version of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as “creepy,” and does it really deserve to be called “the happiest movie ever made”? This multi-modal activity is for use before we begin reading the novel. After we briefly sketch what we know of the movie plot on Freytag’s Pyramid, we will study at least two frozen images from the film with contrasting moods. The first certain image is of the four main characters bounding down the Yellow Brick Road at the beginning of their journey with the whole group. The second will be an exterior shot of the witch’s chambers with the monkeys looking in towards the viewer. Both will be accompanied by a graphic organizer that moves from the objective (colors, verbs, details, perspective) to the more interpretive (what do these colors suggest, for example?) to the more analytical (what details best develop the mood and how?). As a follow up short write or journal, students will create a setting with an intended mood with well-chosen objective details and word choices. This serves as a warm-up activity for their own fantasy pieces, as well.

### Narration exploration

Two activities here are intended to link the verbal with the visual so that students might begin to fill in the gap between the two with their own meaning and ownership.

First, to link language and image, to enhance comprehension, and to help students improve their own writing of dialogue, they will study structures of phrase and use of modifiers as used by Butler in *Bloodchild*. After developing some appreciation for her visual spoken scenes, writers will re-create the form and use with their own re-made dialogue, either from their day or fictionalized. For example, from *Bloodchild*: “I shrank back against the door. ‘Here? Alone?’” The first clause is simple description of action with a strong verb and concrete noun. It is followed by two short questions that sound emotional because of their brevity and interrogative nature. I might model something like: “I dove behind the stone wall. ‘Lights? Sirens?’” After several of these, I’ll encourage students to write a brief exchange of dialogue using image and language effectively.

Another activity to link language to image to reinforce comprehension and engagement will turn the students into visual artists, in charge of re-making the verbal. Students will draw at least one detailed drawing from a description in the story, forcing them to slow down, see details that will bring the scene to life and sustain in the readers’ minds. In the first six pages of the story, before the inciting incident, there are regular pieces of description to give the reader a dynamic visual of T’Gatoi, with her segments, velvety underside and length. Mining these pieces, students will draw what they “see” and explain their visual interpretations.

### Fantasy writing project

Several other activities beyond our usual practices will fill out the unit. The cumulative writing project will be a developed, original fantasy story that remakes or looks anew at a reality for the writer. YA fantasy writer Laurence Yep says, “By transforming the familiar into the unfamiliar, writers can also change the ordinary into the extraordinary. Take one step to the side, and authors can create lively stories; but if they take an additional step to the side they begin to think in terms of fantasy. . .”<sup>16</sup> Writing a story in the subjunctive allows them to ask “what if?” in a safe place. This piece gives them the opportunity to do that, while

converging what they've learned about plot, dialogue, story type, and reading fantastic literature for new meaning. They will "prewrite" at least one character by drawing it in detail as an exercise in character development. They will create scenes with detail for mood and meaning as a filmmaker would a storyboard. They will include dialogue imbued with emotion for the skill they have developed. Most importantly, they will have the power to write their own future or present reality with new clarity, based in their own paracosmic imaginations.

### **Installation art**

Kara Walker's *Subtlety* provides another chance for students to use visual art to build their skills in analysis. As in literature, students studying the piece can find evidence of symbolism, setting, characterization, and theme. At the end of this unit, when they have seen the Art 21 video on the evolution of the Walker's work, my students will collaboratively create an installation piece, probably in our building unless a site specific to the needs of the piece becomes apparent. I imagine that this will evolve organically once an issue or topic is selected. Regardless of the topic, we'll brainstorm about images, associations, language, and geography, and consider how materials might be used along with these things to convey metaphor, serve as symbol, and develop theme. We may discover that other ways to add layers of meaning. We'll create our own rubric to assess our success.

## **Academic standards**

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Oklahoma has new English/language arts standards. They are easy to cross-reference with other academic standards. As written, they vary little if at all among 9-12 grade levels, so I have included only 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

10.2.R.1 Students will summarize, paraphrase, and synthesize ideas, while maintaining meaning and a logical sequence of events, within and between texts.

10.2.R.2 Students will analyze details in literary and nonfiction/informational texts to connect how genre supports the author's purpose.

10.2.W.1 Students will apply components of a recursive writing process for multiple purposes to create a focused, organized, and coherent piece of writing.

10.3.R.1 Students will evaluate the extent to which historical, cultural, and/or global perspectives affect authors' stylistic and organizational choices in grade-level literary and informational genres.

10.3.R.3 Students will analyze how authors use key literary elements to contribute to meaning and interpret how themes are connected across texts:

- character development
- theme
- conflict (i.e., internal and external)
- archetypes

10.3.R.7 Students will make connections (e.g., thematic links, literary analysis) between and across multiple

texts and provide textual evidence to support their inferences.

NARRATIVE 10.3.W.1 Students will write narratives embedded in other modes as appropriate.

10.4.W.2 Students will select appropriate language to create a specific effect according to purpose in writing.

10.7.R.1 Students will analyze techniques used to achieve the intended rhetorical purposes in written, oral, visual, digital, non-verbal, and interactive texts to generate and answer interpretive and applied questions to create new understandings.

10.7.R.2 Students will analyze the impact of selected media and formats on meaning.

10.7.W.2 Students will create visual and/or multimedia presentations using a variety of media forms to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence for diverse audiences.

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