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Teaching critical literacy skills through fantasy literature:

Case studies from three Connecticut high schools

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Summary of Thesis submitted for PhD degree

by

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on

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The purpose of this thesis was to explore the teaching of critical literacy through fantasy literature. This research explores the possibility of a union between a pedagogy of empowerment and a literature of the fantastic, a union which will help improve our lives and democratize our world while validating a literature, often seen as primarily escapist, as worthy of literary study in secondary schools. The research is significant due to the paucity of scholarly research into the teaching of critical literacy through teachers' use of fantasy literature. The research methodology involved a qualitative analysis of three case studies, each of which entailed 1) teacher interviews, 2) classroom observations, 3) student interviews, and 4) analysis of written work produced by students. Student work was assessed against a rubric that examined the degree to which critical literacy skills were manifest. Each case was bounded by the teaching of fantasy texts which the students discussed and analyzed. Although some students are not predisposed toward fantasy literature and can be distanced by some of the elements inherent in such texts, the research findings suggest that dismissing the genre of fantasy literature as escapist and superficial ignores the potential for motivating students and discounts the richness and depth of many fantasy texts. Fantasy literature can be a rich, complex source for analysis and is an appropriate vehicle to teach critical literacy skills.

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Preface

This thesis was written by an American educator for an American audience and examines American students in American classrooms. It will therefore be written in American English. This is not intended to disparage British English in any way, nor slight the people of the scepter'd isle. I merely access the conventions of language most familiar to me to complete this document. Please accept my apologies and pardon the linguistic variations.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Critical Literacy	15
Literacy	17
Critical Literacy	22
Teaching literature through a traditional framework	31
Teaching critical literacy skills	37
Summary	42
Chapter Three: Fantasy Literature	44
Fantasy literature defined	53
Summary	57
Chapter Four: Fantasy Literature and Critical Literacy	59
Figure 1: Key Questions of Critical Literacy	63
<i>The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe</i>	63
<i>The Hobbit</i>	70
<i>The Lord of the Rings</i>	78
<i>A Wizard of Earthsea</i>	86
<i>Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone</i>	94
Summary	101
Chapter Five: Methodology	103
Nature of educational research	105
Arguments for the use of a case study design.	108
Design approaches used in other studies	110
Qualitative research methods	118
Trustworthiness	121
Authenticity	126
Ethical guidelines	127
Summary	130

Chapter Six: Case Study Composition	132
Overview	132
Teacher interviews	133
Stage One Interview	135
Stage Two Interview	136
Stage Three Interview	145
Summary: Teacher interviews	148
Student interview questions	148
Observations of classroom lessons	154
Analysis of student work	158
Rubric analysis	159
Figure 2: Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric	161
Content analysis	163
Overview of the school environment	167
Selection of research subjects	168
Summary	169
Chapter Seven: Results	171
Case Study A: Adams High School	
School community and demographics	173
Teacher background: Sandra Jameson	174
Course overview: “In Another World”	177
Lesson observation #1	183
Lesson observation #2	189
Student essay analyses of <i>The Once and Future King</i>	196
Discussion of student essays	197
Summary: Case Study A	201
Case Study B: Butler High School	
School community and demographics	203
Teacher background: Nate Berger	204
Course overview: “Fantasy, Fairy Tales, and Myth”	207
Lesson observation #1	212
Lesson observation #2	220
Lesson observation #3	225
Student essay analyses of <i>Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone</i>	231

Discussion of student essays	232
Summary: Case Study B	236
Case Study C: Carter High School	
School community and demographics	238
Teacher background: James Parvis	239
Course overview: “Mythology”	241
Lesson observation #1: Course introduction	245
Lesson observation #2: Student analysis	247
Lesson observation #3: Student analysis	252
Lesson observation #4: Student analysis	256
Student essay analysis of <i>The Lion King</i>	259
Student essay analysis of <i>Shrek</i>	263
Summary: Case Study C	266
Student perspectives	267
Summary	271
Chapter Eight: Conclusions	272
Data summary	272
Research sub-questions answered	273
Figure 3: Aspects of critical literacy addressed	276
Chapter Nine: Limitations and Further Thoughts	289
Research limitations	289
Recommendations for further research	293
Personal reflections	295
Works Cited	298
Appendices	316

Chapter One: Introduction

Teaching Critical Literacy Through Fantasy Literature

As a high school teacher of English, I am occasionally asked by my students, “Why do we have to read this stuff? When are we ever going to use it? Why are these books so important anyway?” These are all good questions worthy of thoughtful answers. In part, this thesis addresses these questions, helping to explain the purpose of reading—and studying—literature at all. I take a pragmatic approach to reading literature: I want the skills I am trying to engender in my students to be valuable to them on a daily basis.

More specifically, this thesis examines the use of critical literacy philosophy in the classroom, a pedagogy that helps students understand how a piece of literature attempts to position them (some might say “influence” or “manipulate” them) and how students can learn to recognize that attempt. The student-reader may naturalize that message, appropriate it, or subvert it, but the important element is the initial recognition of the message. That the study of literature through critical literacy helps empower students by giving them a measure of control over the messages that bombard them daily is a central tenet of critical literacy and of my pedagogy. If my job as a teacher is to empower my students, and learning more about critical literacy can help me do this, then I owe it to my students to educate myself further about critical literacy and to broaden the access my students have to texts that help them develop those skills.

Teaching students critical literacy skills involves more than simply helping them understand the message behind an individual text such as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s (1850) *The Scarlet Letter* or George Eliot’s (1874) *Middlemarch*. Although many teachers who use such texts as these in their classrooms (and have done so for many years) are successful at helping students enrich their lives through in-depth studies of these works,

their success is limited if students walk away from the text without a thorough understanding of clear strategies they can use to uncover the themes embedded in unfamiliar books and *how those themes are employed to influence their understanding of the socio-historic time period in which they and the text reside respectively.*

The concluding italicized clause in the previous paragraph is at the heart of the critical literacy philosophy and differentiates a critically literate student from one who can merely decode a text. Students who learn to analyze literature by decoding the underlying themes of a small cache of literary works, learning only the “accepted” interpretations of those works, are being short-changed at the least; at the worst, they are being intellectually limited, stunted, or even indoctrinated by over-exposure to such texts which tend to be Eurocentric (Applebee, 1989). They are being taught to access *interpretations*, not to access *texts*. They understand the messages that undergird a few books, but they do not understand how to read critically. It is that final word—*critically*—that distinguishes a literacy of democracy from a literacy of decoding, for critical literacy is a literacy of democracy, helping students to learn how to read resistantly, to move through the text, to move *beyond* the text, uncovering the unique political, social, or historic agenda that drives the work—indeed, that drives *every* work. This thesis will examine the concept of critical literacy and discuss the extent to which teachers can engender the requisite skills in their students through fantasy texts to help them become critically literate readers, active participants in a democratic society.

Critical literacy involves the *strategic* use of literacy which is a skill that is highly valued in contemporary society and that, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1991, p. 121), raises two questions: “What purpose does literacy serve? And, who benefits from it?” The answer to the first question, as argued by Apple (1993, p. 193), is that literacy should be viewed as “a crucial means to gain power and control over our entire lives...to create not ‘functional literacy,’ but *critical* literacy, *powerful* literacy, *political*

literacy” (emphasis in original). Literacy then should have a purpose beyond “mere” personal enlightenment, beyond aesthetic enjoyment. It should be purposeful and pragmatic. It should liberate and empower. When the skills of critical literacy have been internalized, the student is the recipient of the benefits of literacy.

Paradoxically, literacy itself can be seen simultaneously as both enlightening and restrictive, liberating and dominating, empowering and alienating (Harman & Edelsky, 1989), a concept that critical literacy attempts to counteract. An individual who is literate—*i.e.*, who can decode words and understand literal meanings—can interact with texts, learning about the world around them, yet can be *manipulated* by the texts in subtle ways which can restrict the individual’s social, historical, and/or political understanding. Literacy can liberate one from ignorance but simultaneously dominate or even exploit an imprudent reader. This illustrates the importance of critical literacy which aims to empower the reader to subvert messages intended to—consciously or unconsciously, actively or passively, knowingly or unknowingly—dominate the reader. While there is no guarantee that a critical approach to literacy will ensure that a reader resists such control, illiteracy can almost ensure one of being marginalized and disempowered by the hegemonic culture (Green, 2001).

Lisa Delpit (Teale, 1991) distinguishes between two types of literacy: “personal literacy” (literacy for one’s own aesthetic enjoyment or personal fulfillment) and “power code literacy” (literacy that gives access to the larger social and political world and power structure). Examples of the use of personal literacy might include reading a sonnet to enjoy the beauty of the language and the emotional evocations, or reading a short story to appreciate the structure of the narrative and the imagery created in the story. Examples of the use of power code literacy might include being able to read and understand the opinions presented in newspaper editorials, to consider the implications of arguments developed in a magazine article and respond to them critically, or to read a

short story or novel and understand how the author is framing his or her message in such a way that the reader is persuaded to move toward the author's position. Thus, while Delpit's notion of personal literacy seems to exist separately from her concept of power code literacy, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive approaches to a single piece of literature: a text may be read for personal enjoyment as well as to access social and/or political power themes, especially considering that her notion of power code literacy can be equated with critical literacy, at least according to Fabos (2009, p. 844) who notes that "with critical literacy...all discourse is considered political", implying that even the sonnet and the short story carry political overtones at the very least.

Fabos's view is also articulated by Lankshear and McLaren (1993), who discuss the political nature of critical literacy, saying that

critical literacy uses texts and print skills in ways that enable students to examine the politics of daily life within contemporary society with a view to understanding what it means to locate contradictions within modes of life, theories, and substantive intellectual positions, *and to actively seek out such contradictions*. It means enlisting the literate and intellectual capacities of learners in the task of understanding how theories and practices based upon theories, including education itself, cannot be neutral. And it calls for engaging them seriously in the acts of theorizing and evaluating theory in politically informed ways. (p. 36, emphasis in original)

Thus, the importance of critical literacy as well as its practical application to the lives of students is established.

This leads to the core of this thesis which aims to examine to what extent fantasy literature—often viewed as a mere "genre" of literature that some scholars, teachers, and "informed" readers dismiss from serious canonical consideration (Drout, 2006)—is textually rich, intellectually challenging, and structurally complex, to what extent fantasy contains elements that encourages critical analysis, and to what extent, for these reasons, fantasy is a suitable vehicle to engender the skills of critical literacy in students.

To what extent can students learn about how a text “positions” them, how a text validates or approves some voices and silences or marginalizes others, how a text hegemonizes one social group while suppressing another, how a text can be read resistantly or appropriated by the reader through the literary genre of fantasy?

But, the detractors of fantasy note, fantasy is for children, for amusement, for escape (Tolkien, 1939). It is not for serious consideration of serious issues by serious readers (Shippey, 2011). Is it not? What body of literature explores so intelligently, so pervasively, so *seriously* such broadly-encompassing, existential, all-too-human issues as the nature of evil, the role of good in the world, and the cosmic struggle between these forces; the power of language and its importance in shaping our thoughts and bringing order to the chaotic world around us; the superficiality of racial differences and the fact that, human or hobbit, elf or dwarf, ent or eagle, we all have a vested interest in the world, having more ties that bind us together than swords that cut us apart; the deific ponderings involving whether some divine intelligence or purposeful force guides our actions to lead us to some foregone destiny over which we puny humans have no meaningful influence, or whether we control our actions, guiding our fates according to our own moral compass toward an unknown end that cannot be termed “random” because of the role our intelligence plays in directing our actions. These are serious issues explored by serious writers for our serious consideration.

Despite this, some scholars (Raffel, 1968) see fantasy as primarily *escapist* (as opposed to *interpretive*¹). Some may consider this pronouncement as a death knell for serious literature; but what person, trapped in a mundane world and surrounded by the commonplace of everyday life might not desire some escape? As Tolkien (1939, p. 148) put it, “Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get

¹ Laurence Perrine (1988) distinguishes between these terms as follows: “Escape literature is that written purely for entertainment—to help us pass the time agreeably. Interpretive literature is written to broaden and deepen and sharpen our awareness of life.” (p. 4) He later (Arp & Johnson, 2006, p. 62) revises the terms, changing *escapist* to *commercial* and *interpretive* to *literary*, an equally unsatisfactory distinction, unfortunately.

out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls?" Is this not why we read literature in the first place? Escapist literature can help us suspend reality briefly, even those whose lives are not quite so unpleasant as that of the prisoner in Tolkien's example. But even escapist literature, despite Perrine's (1988, p. 62) distinction (see footnote 1) between escapist and interpretive fiction, can help us to "broaden and deepen and sharpen our awareness of life," as will be seen in the pages that follow.

This is the primary objective for this thesis: to explore the possibility of a union between a pedagogy of empowerment and a literature of the fantastic, a union which, it is to be hoped, will help improve our lives and democratize our world while validating a primarily escapist literature as a genre worthy of study in secondary schools. Therefore, this thesis will address the following major research question: **To what extent can critical literacy skills be taught through the use of fantasy literature?**

This research question is significant given the paucity of scholarly research into the teaching of critical literacy through teachers' use of fantasy literature in their classrooms. Many articles explore methods of teaching and are written by practitioners who are sharing their expertise with the teaching public. Some laud the use of critical literacy in the classroom, sharing personal experiences in the life of the author (Gaughan, 1999; Shannon & Labbo, 2002). Others are anecdotal and exhortative, exploring instances of the teaching of critical literacy with literature of the fantastic in order to promote their use in the classroom (Cox, 1990; Prothero, 1990). Some are "how-to" publications aimed at showing teachers how best to help students develop critical literacy skills using a variety of texts and pedagogies (Beach & Marshall, 1991; Salvio, 1994; Gaughan, 1999; Leland, et al., 1999). While some of these publications include fantasy literature, and others provide guidance on teaching critical literacy skills, none study the two in a substantive way according to a rigorous methodology.

An extensive search of the literature into the teaching of critical literacy skills through fantasy literature revealed nothing of significance, further suggesting a need to explore the topic formally.

Providing a meaningful answer to the primary research question requires attention to numerous sub-questions, the first of which involves a discussion of the concept of critical literacy. Although the concept of a critical pedagogy was developed more than forty years ago, an overview of the current scholarship surrounding the pedagogy is crucial to contextualize this discussion. In addition, the concept is interpreted in slightly different ways among different researchers and practitioners, most notably between those of the Neo-Marxist/Freirean approach and those of the Australian school of thought. These differences will be discussed in Chapter Two (“Critical Literacy”), but in brief, the Neo-Marxist/Freirean approach to critical literacy is highly politicized, presuming that texts are driven by an agenda of oppression of the disenfranchised, and the role of the critically literate reader is to strive to balance the social inequities perpetuated by the text. Australian critical literacy, on the other hand, does not presume the text attempts to exploit the underprivileged; rather, it recognizes that language is a social construct that is never neutral and the role of the critically literate is to understand how language works to position the reader (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002).

Once an understanding of what is meant by *critical literacy* is gained, an examination of how teachers engender critical literacy skills in their students in a general sense can be undertaken. Seeing how teachers themselves implement the theory of critical literacy in their classrooms and which texts they generally use will provide models of success that can be used to compare against classrooms that teach the same skills using less traditional texts (*i.e.*, fantasy literature)². Moreover, texts teachers

² I anticipate that, given the conservative nature of curriculums in Connecticut high schools, the formal use of fantasy literature will not be nearly as prevalent as the use of more canonical texts such as F. Scott

perceive as appropriate for teaching critical literacy skills can be noted, thereby illustrating the potential of this thesis in terms of broadening teachers' perceptions of fantasy literature.

In addition to a definition of critical literacy, we must provide a definition of the term *fantasy literature*. This slippery term is, like many other abstract concepts, broadly recognized in practice but poorly defined in theory. The United States Supreme Court faced a similar conundrum when, in 1964, a legal case required the Court to define the term *obscene*. Justice Potter Stewart, in attempting to explain what is encompassed by the term, sidestepped the issue by saying, "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced [by the term "obscene"]...[b]ut I know it when I see it..." (Jacobellis v. Ohio, 1964). Although we may think we "know fantasy literature when we see it," a thorough, more precise definition is necessary to help establish the scope and limitations of this thesis. To do this, several definitions of fantasy created by scholars in the field will be examined, fitting examples of fantasy literature into those definitions to see how—and how well—they fit, before presenting a working definition of fantasy literature.

A discussion of significant fantasy literature texts interpreted through the lens of critical literacy will follow, and an examination of some of the advantages and disadvantages of using fantasy literature as a vehicle for teaching critical literacy skills will then be outlined. This will necessitate a discussion of several prominent examples of fantasy literature, including J.R.R. Tolkien's (1954, 1955) *The Lord of the Rings*, Ursula K. Le Guin's (1968) *A Wizard of Earthsea*, J.K. Rowling's (1997) *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis (1950). Discussions of these works will be provided, incorporating elements of scholarly interpretations of them to establish their value as appropriate texts for use in

Fitzgerald's (1925) *The Great Gatsby*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1850) *The Scarlet Letter*, Harper Lee's (1960) *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or any Shakespearean play.

high school classrooms focused on critical literacy. Some impediments to using these works will also be identified, including objections voiced by scholars and communities, objections that encompass both the literary nature of fantasy works as well as issues revolving around religion and morality. It is important to establish both the benefits and detriments of using fantasy literature to engender critical literacy because the former implies the possibilities inherent in using fantasy works while the latter identifies some of the roadblocks. Widely-held perceptions of fantasy are germane to teachers who consider adopting such texts for use in their classrooms, to districts considering the content of their curriculums, to parents whose children might be exposed to such texts, and to students who are assigned to read the works.

Once these foundational elements—definitions of terms, scope of use, and perceptions of both fantasy and critical literacy—have been established, some elements of teaching practice that will be explored through the subsequent research will be outlined. Several teaching strategies will be discussed in the context of the classroom—as well as uncovering the theory behind each—before applying them to fantasy literature, all of which leads to additional questions that will be answered: How might success in the classroom be measured, specifically as regards the teaching of critical literacy? And what elements of a classroom, of a teaching practice, and of student work will yield a useful portrayal of student learning? These questions and others will be answered using prior research in classrooms as guidance. This section will help inform the methodological choices of the research and strengthen the veracity of the findings.

In order to conduct research, one must usually have research subjects, and this thesis requires them as well. An explanation of which high schools were selected for study will be shared. This is important because the specific pedagogy being studied (*i.e.*, critical literacy) combined with the uncommonly-used genre of fantasy is unlikely to yield a large amount of subjects for study relative to the total number of English

teachers in Connecticut and may necessitate research driven more by opportunity than by random or cross-sectional sampling.

Once the criteria for selection of the subjects for research have been established, some of the methods for completing the examination of the subjects will be discussed while striving to ensure that a variety of methods are used in order to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study through triangulation of the data. A case study comprised of interviews, classroom observations, and examinations of student work will be the unit of analysis in an attempt to answer these questions: Did the teacher teach the skills they said they were going to teach, and how can the learning that supposedly took place among the students be demonstrated? This question is difficult to answer on a large-scale basis (*e.g.*, when considering whether all students in the state of Connecticut learned enough to earn a high school diploma), but is much more manageable on a smaller scale (*e.g.*, in three classrooms) when individuals can be interviewed and student work analyzed in depth. The greater the depth of analysis, the broader the variety of methods, and the more demonstrable subjective perceptions can be, the more trustworthy and authentic the results can be considered. Triangulation of data will help to validate the findings and minimize any observer bias, moving toward results that are as objective as possible.

Above, the paucity of fantasy texts that are used in high school classrooms was speculated upon. Because of the importance of fantasy texts to this thesis, the prevalence of fantasy texts in high school classrooms in Connecticut will be discussed, with particular attention to the use of fantasy for the teaching of critical literacy skills. Judging from the popularity of fantasy novels world-wide (Drout, 2006), it seems that fantasy literature should occupy a prevalent place in high school classrooms. Since intrinsic motivation is a key factor in improving literacy (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991) and one can reasonably assume that reading appealing novels is intrinsically motivating for

students, it can be posited that teachers may be able to motivate students more readily by using novels that appeal to them, like works of fantasy. Still, curricular demands and the use of traditional texts in academia being what they are, fantasy novels may still be relatively under-represented as teaching tools in high school classrooms.

An initial survey was conducted prior to the start of the formal research project in this thesis in which the department chairs in each of the 137 public high schools in Connecticut were asked about the formal use of fantasy literature in the classrooms of their schools. This was done because, in Connecticut, the department chairpersons are intimately involved in the development of the school curriculum, from the development of courses and the identification of academic standards appropriate to each grade level to the selection of texts in each course and often the types of assessments given to students in those courses. Also, an examination of the published programs of studies of each of these schools was undertaken to determine the extent to which high schools have courses devoted, in whole or in part, to fantasy literature. It was discovered that only seven schools out of 137 incorporated courses devoted to fantasy literature in a formal way, and each of these courses was an optional one-semester course for students. While some teachers, according to the results of the survey, employ fantasy literature sporadically in courses devoted to other literary areas such as genre studies or British literature, none admitted to using fantasy on a regular basis: fantasy was generally used only occasionally in the classroom or as optional texts for students to read outside of class.

Through formal interviews during the research process and informal conversations with teachers from several different districts, as well as through a review of scholarly opinions of the use of fantasy in the classroom, several objections have been raised. These objections to fantasy seem to be threefold: 1) concerns over religious imagery (e.g., witches and magic) (Dickerson & O'Hara, 2006); 2) concerns

over the age-appropriateness of fantasy texts (i.e., Tolkien's [1937] novel *The Hobbit* was termed a "children's book" by one parent, and Rowling's Harry Potter series was called "kids' books" by one teacher) (Owen, 1984; La Raé, 2006); and 3) the general lack of literariness of fantasy texts, a criticism leveled by numerous scholars (Thomas, 2003; Stableford, 2005; Drout, 2006; Shippey, 2002, 2011). This view of fantasy as inappropriate for use in a high school classroom in the United States seems at odds with the perceptions of fantasy in the United Kingdom where fantasy is often a staple text in most schools.

Although this thesis will focus on the use of written fantasy texts, the current emphasis in Connecticut on visual literacy (CT SDE, 2010) will entail some research into the use of visual fantasy texts (i.e., original fantasy films and adaptations of written fantasy texts). While the terms "novel" and "film" are obviously different, many scholars (The New London Group, 1996; Beach & O'Brien, 2009; Fabos, 2009; Squire, 2009; Gee, 2007) have taken the position that the term "text" can refer broadly to written or visual media, including films, video games, art work, television shows and commercials, and the Internet, and that the term "literacy" can refer to competence in encoding or decoding such texts, developing an understanding of conventions of the various media, learning interpretive skills, etc.—in short, all the skills necessary to the reader of written literary texts. Therefore, the term "literature" will be used in a similarly broad context as "text" is used; that is, inclusive of films and other visual media. This position is further warranted by Kress (2000) who notes that "it is now impossible to make sense of texts, even the linguistic parts alone, without having a clear idea of what these other [visual] features might be contributing to the meaning of a text" (p. 337) and that what an "image describes cannot be described in words" (339). His comments suggest that the study of visual media such as film, is equally as valuable as the study of written media such as novels. The position of these researchers on the

importance of visual text warrants the use of films as legitimate “literary” forms for analysis in the classrooms, and as such student analyses of films will be included in this study.

A final question for consideration—one that is related to the above concern— involves the reasons for the use (or not) of fantasy works in high school classrooms. Currently, Connecticut school systems are unique in their system of curriculum development. The United States does not now have a national curriculum and, unlike other states, Connecticut does not mandate a state-wide curriculum (though it does offer several curriculum frameworks and standards³). Therefore, individual school districts are left to develop their own curriculums, including the required texts in each course, (CT SDE, 2010) which, presumably, reflect the intellectual interests, morals, and values of stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, curriculum coordinators, parents, and students—in short, whoever might be involved in the writing of curriculum for a district. As a result, individual teachers—who, quite often, currently work within that district—may be able to influence curriculum content, dictating some or all of the texts that are included for examination in the classroom, and as such would presumably be able to articulate the reasons for their inclusion or exclusion from courses. These reasons are germane to this thesis since they would illuminate any barriers that might exist to incorporating fantasy literature into a curriculum due to negative personal perceptions of the literary quality of fantasy, district restrictions on non-canonical texts, religious opposition or other censorship issues, personal dislike of the genre, or any other obstacles that may exist.

Through this research, the use of critical literacy as a pedagogical strategy may be expanded, fantasy literature may be validated as a viable means of engendering

³ At the time of this writing, frameworks have been issued for the following curricular areas in Connecticut high schools: Health & Physical Education, English Language Arts, English Language Learners, Mathematics, Information & Technology Literacy, Science, and World Languages (CT SDE, 2010).

critical literacy skills in students, and literary choices for teachers of English may be broadened, moving beyond a strict reliance on canonical works as classroom texts.

Chapter Two: Critical Literacy

In this chapter, the basic tenets of critical literacy will be outlined with an emphasis on the development of literacy as it relates to education, and the subsequent development of critical literacy. Through this discussion, the most salient aspects of critical literacy pedagogy will be identified, noting how these skills are generally developed in students. Fantasy literature in general will then be discussed with a brief, working definition of the term provided before discussing some representative texts in greater depth, the purpose of which is to argue that the identified fantasy texts contain elements that enable teachers to help students develop critical literacy skills.

What is *critical literacy*? Critical literacy is a pedagogical approach to literacy pioneered by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in the 1970s (Freire, 1970, 1976). The theory has been developed throughout the years by dozens of educational theorists and is still employed by teachers in classrooms today. Critical literacy arises from the premise that all texts promote—either consciously or unconsciously on the part of the author—a particular worldview, that the text attempts to persuade the reader to accept that perspective, and that these persuasive elements often exist below the surface of the text which must be studied closely (*i.e.*, critically) to uncover these biases. It involves a two-pronged approach to the study of literature: 1) Analysis of the text, and 2) Application of the lessons learned. Critical literacy encourages readers to uncover and analyze such elements of the text as

- Social and political forces represented;
- Perspectives (*i.e.*, voices) validated, marginalized, or silenced; and
- Issues explored and thematic perspectives illustrated.

Once these elements have been examined, students are further encouraged

- To re-envision or re-interpret the text from different perspectives in order to offer alternate readings of the text;
- To use the text as a means of self-reflection leading to self-improvement; and finally
- To consider the results of the analysis as a means to help facilitate justice and equity in the world.

A reader who embraces this philosophy refuses to play a passive role and blindly accept the themes of the text as “gospel.” Practitioners and advocates of critical literacy feel that such an approach is urgently important in order to encourage readers to be thinking participants in a democratic society, and that to do so requires that a reader discriminate between what the author wants the reader to think and what the reader actually thinks about the subject from their own perspective. Thus, the term *critical* means “urgently important” as well as “discriminating.” In adopting a critically literate approach, the reader resists being manipulated, or “positioned,” by the text to adopt the ideas and perspectives presented.

The term *critical literacy* itself—when applied to pedagogy—is broadly understood to refer to a philosophy of literacy that encourages students to recognize and consciously consider the political agenda(s) embedded within any text. Although the implications and subtleties of the concept vary from theoretician to theoretician (McLaren, 2006), the term itself embraces a multiplicity of meanings that stem from a variety of assumptions about reading and teaching. In general, proponents of critical literacy believe that texts “do not *reflect* reality, they promote a certain *version* of reality, and they position their readers within a certain reality as well” (Apol, 1998, p. 34, emphasis in original). When “applied to reading, critical theory leads to questioning and challenging the ways authors and texts attempt to persuade, influence, and position readers as well as examining the values, experiences, and beliefs that readers bring to a

text” (Damico, et al., 2009, p. 178). What follows is a discussion of the broader term “literacy” and a more thorough definition of critical literacy that identifies several prominent theoretical approaches.

Literacy

Modern researchers define the term *literacy* in various ways, depending on what they see as the scope and purpose of literacy skills. Csikszentmihalyi (1991, p. 120) broadly defines literacy simply as “the ability to code and decode information,” though he does not here clarify to what extent a reader must understand what has been read. While he does not clearly specify the form (*e.g.*, printed text, artistic, film, photographs, etc.) in which the information is conveyed, it is clear from the context that he refers to printed words⁴ that encompass fiction as well as nonfiction texts. Therefore, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1991, p. 120), “illiterates...are excluded from the network of information mediated by symbols” because they can neither encode nor decode printed text.

On the other hand, more precise definitions of literacy have been posited. Gee (1993b, p. 288), in particular, defines the term to mean “fluency in a given social practice...[not only as] ‘the ability to read and write’ ” or merely decode print since, he points out, “literate” children who can construct coherent, original stories and cogently relate them to hearers sometimes cannot themselves read or write. Children can do this, according to Gee (1993b), by learning and internalizing common story structures and the conventions of literary narratives through repeated contact with oral storytellers, then simply reconfiguring those structures and conventions into unique frameworks and applying their own fictional content to create original compositions, an ability he calls *literacy*. Thus, young children who are able to demonstrate their fluency in crafting

⁴ This is an important distinction, as later theorists (Beach & O’Brien, 2009; Fabos, 2009; Squire, 2009; Gee, 2007) expanded the term “text” beyond mere printed symbols, encompassing electronic media (*i.e.*, the Internet), video games, and film to name just a few.

narrative texts, though they cannot themselves encode or decode print material, can be seen as *literate*.

Gee (1993b) also asserts his belief that human communication symbols are largely arbitrary, thus mitigating the importance of decoding written language symbols in favor of what can be seen as a broader literacy of cultural Discourses⁵. The problem with Gee's definition of literacy stems from the fact that the "literate" storytelling children he uses as an example cannot participate in even the most basic meaning-making when presented with symbols (*i.e.*, letters and words) which, arbitrary or not, are a critical means of communication in many cultures, and are much more useful to convey nuanced information than the simple picture-book stories he uses to illustrate a child's "literacy". Additionally, our technologically-advancing world requires that individuals possess sophisticated communication skills and learn information from written texts (among others) that they do not themselves experience directly (Resnick, 1991); thus, they must decode and encode print material, not just be able to invent or repeat stories, despite being fluent with certain structural conventions of communication.

The larger point to emphasize—one on which literacy researchers generally agree—is that our world has moved beyond simple decoding of written texts and mere rote memorization of carefully prepared explanations of those texts (Resnick, 1991). Essential literacy skills lie in individuals being able to understand what they read and to apply interpretations to written works that have not been explicated for them. Decoding, then, is a prerequisite for understanding, and understanding is a prerequisite for clear, effective communication. However, understanding itself is not a sufficient goal for education. A reader, especially a student, must move beyond comprehension of

⁵ Gee (1993a) defines *cultural Discourse* as referring to "socioculturally characteristic ways of being in the world" by which members of any given society enact a more or less recognizable identity (*e.g.*, English teacher, baseball player, lawyer, teenager, housewife, etc.). According to Gee, "the Discourses that make up a society are a grid or framework...against which words and deeds, as well as things,...are interpreted, recognized, rendered meaningful" (pp. 26-27).

a text if she or he is to develop higher-order critical thinking skills, an important aspect of contemporary education (Krathwohl, 2002).

Early literacy in America (*i.e.*, as viewed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) was perceived as the extent to which a reader was able to decode text, and understanding was judged according to a reader's ability to repeat acceptable catechetical interpretations of Christian Church canon (Resnick, 1991), not whether a reader was able to extract meaning from the text by bringing personal experiences to bear in an active, individualized, critical interpretation. "The pedagogical tradition placed a great deal of importance on confirming the authority of received texts" (Resnick, 1991, p. 19), not questioning that authority or interpreting a text independently. This background in literacy is important to understand as it illuminates the tension between early pedagogical views of literacy and modern critical pedagogy, and highlights the role of the individual in the interpretation of texts.

It is the individual's analytical interpretation of the text—a reader's relationship *with* the text—that is central to the critical literacy ideology, an ideology which some researchers (Damico, et al., 2009) believe originated with the transactional theory of reading developed and later refined by Rosenblatt (1938, 1978). Her theory posits that a literary text contains "a proliferation of meanings, rather than single or fixed meanings," which govern a reader's interpretation or textual response to that literary work (Damico, et al., 2009, p. 178). Meaning, according to Rosenblatt, does not reside in the text, nor does one specific, fixed interpretation of a text exist that readers must internalize. In fact, her theory suggests that, not only may separate readers develop individual interpretations of the same text, any single reader who interacts with the same text at different times in their life may develop distinct, more or less equally valid interpretations which are in part dependent upon the experiences the reader brings to the work (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978). Rosenblatt maintained "the interdependence of both

text and reader, holding neither solely determinate of meaning” (Damico, et al., 2009, p. 178), but suggesting that meaning is derived through the interaction between the two. Her theory was linked philosophically with the Frankfurt School of Social Science (cir. 1930), a group of social reconstructionists who opposed the philosophical positions of logical positivism⁶ and instrumental rationality⁷, believing instead that what was needed in education was “an expanding definition of literacy—one that encouraged readers and writers to see the ideological basis of any text” (Damico, et al., 2009, p. 179). The concept of uncovering a text’s (or author’s) ideology forms the basis of a central purpose of the philosophy of critical literacy, as will be shown later.

Another aspect of the larger pedagogical picture of literacy involves the text itself and its importance relative to the reader. Scholars and researchers such as Allan Bloom (1987), Diane Ravitch (2003), William Bennett (1992), Chester Finn (1991), and E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (1988) have promoted the idea that American education should transmit a “cultural canon” of seminal, uniform texts that (purportedly) transcend politics and historical struggle and develop what Hirsch terms a “cultural literacy” (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). This idea of the political and historical transcendence of texts is antithetical to one of the most important tenets of critical literacy: that is, that human experience is historically constructed within specific power relations and texts are embedded in their historical time period. Therefore, by making claims to the political and historical neutrality of texts, Hirsch and others are denying the impact of social forces and as such are in opposition to the beliefs of critical literacy. By refusing to recognize the political and historical agendas of texts and validating their perspectives as authoritative, Hirsch is ignoring their cultural significance and perpetuating the social hegemony the texts depict (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993).

⁶ The belief that it is only through certain mathematical and scientific procedures that we can understand the world and distinguish truth from falsehood (Damico, et al, 2009).

⁷ A pragmatic view that elevates an economic means of achieving particular ends above an intellectual one, ignoring critical or reflective analysis of why those ends were being sought (Damico, et al, 2009).

Proponents of critical literacy, on the other hand, reject Hirsch's claim that texts can claim any degree of cultural neutrality. Instead of advocating an education based upon a fixed pool of knowledge from which students should imbibe (a pedagogy that is disparagingly referred to as the "banking model" of education [Freire, 1970, 1976]), proponents of critical literacy believe that students should be able to recognize the cultural biases embedded within texts and challenge those biases by examining the texts closely to uncover their historicity, their political perspective, and their societal assumptions. In short, students should challenge the status quo represented by the texts (Shor, 1999) and thereby gain a measure of control over their own lives (Wallerstein, 1986). Cultural literacy, then, is founded in content (*i.e.*, texts) while critical literacy is founded in strategies (*i.e.*, ways to uncover biases and political agendas of texts). Put another way, cultural literacy values the *text* while critical literacy values the *reader*.

While Hirsch defended the concept of text neutrality, educational theorist John Searle (1990) advocated for neutrality in a different way, identifying the primary objective of education as the development of the intellect and noting that literacy should not have a political intent. Similar to Hirsch, he promoted the use of high quality texts (though who determines which texts are of "high quality" and what criteria are used to judge them are matters open for debate), grounding his educational philosophy in works which were to be studied in as objective and academic a manner as possible. While few could argue with his belief in the development of the intellect, some critical literacy theorists such as Freire (1970, 1976), Lankshear and McLaren (1993), Shor (1999), and McLaughlin and Devoogd (2004) would argue that Searle consciously detaches education from real-world political and social concerns, favoring instead a perspective that ignores the social responsibility of participants in a democracy. They suggest that being critically literate entails that one works toward understanding with the idea that one will *actively* help democratize the world. To them, literacy entails resistance:

resistance to the political agendas of authors and texts, resistance to a blind acceptance of an inequitable social status quo and unfair political hegemony. However, there must be some distinctions made among the various shades of the term “critical literacy,” as researchers emphasize different aspects of critical literacy and approach the term under different assumptions and premises.

The ten educators who comprise the New London Group, for example, acknowledge the changing literacy landscape in our world, emphasizing the connectedness of our social environment and literacy pedagogy (New London Group, 1996). For them, the social world is simultaneously culturally and linguistically diverse and yet more globalized and interconnected than at any other time in history. Our world is also marked by a “burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies,” (p. 61), including an increasing number of texts that incorporate visual components. Furthermore, they suggest that literacy pedagogy “creates the potential for building learning conditions leading to full and equitable social participation” (p. 60)—thus outlining a pedagogy of empowerment, a key feature of critical literacy.

Critical literacy

Critical literacy has been an important pedagogical practice for many years, having its origins in Louise Rosenblatt’s (1938, 1978) transactional theory of literary criticism which was developed in the late 1930s, but interpretations of the theory have varied since its initial articulation by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970, 1976) in the 1970s. Some researchers view critical literacy as deriving from Marxist, feminist, and postmodern intellectual positions (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993), while others argue that no clear, identifiable position defines critical literacy (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Still others (Donald, 1993; Comber, 1993; Grande, 2004) skirt the issue, identifying

variations among critical literacy perspectives, differentiating them according to the types of questions that drive interpretation and analysis, instead of defining the theory itself (Green, 2001). However, despite one's definition (or not) of critical literacy, common ideas such as viewing literacy as a social and/or political practice, repositioning readers as active or even resistant readers, "problematizing" texts, and creating in readers an awareness of multiple ways in which to view texts, help clarify what is meant by the term (Green, 2001).

A central premise of Freire's (1970, 1976) theory of critical literacy is that education is not neutral, that the purpose of education is "human liberation" through what Freire termed a "dialogical approach," the goal of which is critical thinking, leading ultimately toward participants gaining an understanding of the social and political forces that impact their world, an understanding that would help them gain control over their lives (Wallerstein, 1986). According to Freire's theories, "true knowledge evolves from the interaction of reflection and action" (Wallerstein, 1986, p. 34). Freire termed this interaction "praxis". This is particularly important in that research on reading and literacy suggests that marginalized adolescent readers tend to "give the text authority, expecting it to provide its meaning unequivocally and effortlessly, rather than engaging in an active, dialogic exchange with the text" (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011, p. 442), a tendency which resistant reading, such as that advocated through Freire's concept of praxis, may help overcome. Essentially, the concept of resistant reading is embodied in the following statements: "I am not going to buy into your position as a matter of course. Still, for a fair understanding and assessment of that position, I will try to get at your underlying assumptions by reading, questioning, and considering the text carefully." An immature reader may not even be aware that resistant reading is even a possibility, much less how it may be

accomplished, but critical theory gives them explicit permission to do so. Thus, critical literacy is a literacy of empowerment.

At the most basic level, teachers of critical literacy are trying to create an awareness of the relationship among language, ideology, and power (Kempe, 1993). They question whose interests are served through curricular and pedagogical decisions, and even attempt to challenge the hidden assumptions that are intended to assimilate students into the hegemonic culture through socialization (Moss, 2001). They address social oppression, especially in the areas of gender, class, race, and ethnicity (Grande, 2004). Finally, they challenge the “banking” model of education in which information is “deposited” in students who are expected to retain it indefinitely—or at least until the exam—and instead favor praxis which promotes the idea that knowledge and learning are social constructions that are best realized through critical interactions between teacher and student, neither of which is recognized as the absolute authority in the classroom (Freire, 1970).

Berlin (1993, p. 266) offers a more technical definition, saying that critical literacy “will have as a prime objective the cultivation of the students’ ability to critique the cultural narratives of others and to construct in their place narratives more adequate to the complexities of their historical conditions.” In other words, students will be able to understand and critique the political and historical message that underlies a text, to know upon what social hegemonic structure the author’s work is predicated and whether the author is trying to preserve the social structure or subvert it. Students must also be able to enlarge the cultural dimensions of the text to take into consideration voices and perspectives that may be underrepresented or ignored in the text in an effort to further “democratize” the text.

In its most political interpretation, critical literacy implies that the process of gaining literacy (*i.e.*, learning to read and write) should be done as part of the process of

becoming conscious of being in some ways “constructed” by the social and political hegemony represented in one’s historical era (Anderson & Irvine, 1993). In other words, one’s growing aptitude for literacy must be linked to one’s understanding of the impact of specific contemporary power relations, and critical literacy involves analyzing and questioning the ways a text positions the reader within the social and political hegemony. If one accepts the underlying assumption of critical literacy—that the concepts of power and social/political hegemony drive the writer who consciously or unconsciously strives to either perpetuate or subvert the social hierarchy—then critical literacy removes “meaning” from the author and text and re-positions the student/reader more centrally in a meaning-making dialogue as they work to uncover the “hidden” agendas of texts, agendas that the authors may not even be aware exist.

There are four main principles of critical literacy, according to McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004), several of which were discussed above:

1. Critical literacy focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation, and action (*i.e.*, Freire’s concept of “praxis”);
2. Critical literacy focuses on the problem and its complexity, rejecting an essentialist view—meaning that a critically literate reader would not be satisfied with a simplistic answer to a situation and would instead ask questions (*i.e.*, problematizing the text) in order to examine the complexity of an issue;
3. Critical literacy [teaching] strategies are dynamic and adapt to the contexts in which they are used;
4. Critical literacy disrupts the commonplace understanding of a text by examining it from multiple perspectives and positing alternate interpretations (pp. 14-16)

The idea of disrupting the commonplace is an important theme in teaching critical literacy skills, as teachers want students to question what they read, and to think critically about its veracity, not to blindly accept the words and ideas of the author, or to treat as gospel the broadly understood interpretations of a text. Disrupting the commonplace requires that students first understand the text as it is presented, then recognize what the author most likely intended to convey (*i.e.*, theme), and finally

brainstorm alternative perspectives from which the text could be viewed. For example, the theme of Ken Kesey's (1962) *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, a novel written from the perspective of an inmate in a brutally repressive mental ward, is commonly interpreted to concern the individual's fight for control in a repressive system which is termed 'the Combine' in the novel. However, the novel could be viewed from the perspective of the hospital administration who are struggling to maintain order within a mentally unbalanced and dangerous population, or from the perspective of inmates who feel comfortable in the environment and are threatened by the disruptive force the protagonist, R.P. McMurphy, brings with him onto the ward.

"Critical literacy involves the reader's understanding of the author's intent, bias, and purpose for writing" (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 62) by "disrupting a common situation or understanding, ... examining multiple viewpoints, ... focusing on sociopolitical issues, ... [and] taking action to promote social justice" (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, pp. 17-18) with the ultimate goal of readers becoming "critics of everyday life" (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 23), reading the world with a critical edge, with an eye toward changing it by first recognizing, then questioning, extant political and social power structures.

It is important to note that critical literacy does not *necessitate* hegemonic subversion on the part of the reader just as feminism does not entail a requirement on the part of women to join the workforce. Both offer only an informed and permissible choice. Some readers, while recognizing the political agenda of a particular text, may choose not to act any more than simply resisting the reading the author presents. Nor does critical literacy consider author bias inherently immoral. In fact, critical literacy presumes that all texts have bias to some degree and that bias is normal and unavoidable (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Critical literacy attempts to draw the attention of the reader to the idea of bias and help them uncover it in texts, requiring that the reader

understand the power relationship between the author and the reader, not just comprehend the text.

Rosenblatt (1938) posits that learners make sense of the world, in part, by connecting prior knowledge with what they are learning, and she suggests that meaning is made as readers transact with the objective text and their subjective context recursively—that readers’ personal experiences shape their understanding of the text—implying that reading and making meaning is both subjective and highly individual. Rosenblatt’s position is supported by Gee (1993a) for whom all communication, or discourse, must be considered within a cultural Discourse⁸ (*i.e.*, cultural context). He also suggests that language implies a multiplicity of meaning, that language does not contain within it any single, fixed, definitive, universal meaning grasped the exact same way by everyone who interacts with it. Instead, meaning is floating, negotiable, changeable, and ambiguous, dependent upon the social context and the sender and receiver(s) of the discourse—a philosophical position that is post-structuralist (due to the plurality and instability of meaning), post-positivist (in that the *message* itself does not change from receiver to receiver though *meaning* might), constructivist (in that meaning is created personally and not objectively), and relativist (in that “truth” is dependent upon social context as well as the cultures of the sender and the receiver), a position also supported by the premises of critical literacy and implied by McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004, p. 23), who note that “discourse represents the *ways reality is perceived and created* using language, complex signs, facial gestures, practices,...and pictures among other things” (my emphasis).

Due to the significance of the context in which discourse occurs and the ambiguity of meaning a text may be seen to embody, discourse analysis becomes an important tool to help uncover bias in texts. Luke (2000) identifies five key theoretical

⁸ See footnote 5 above for a more thorough definition of the way Gee uses the term “cultural Discourse”

positions of discourse analysis and discusses how each might be translated into practical applications in the classroom:

1. Identifying diverse and multiple voices at work in texts, on giving students explicit access to these cultural and historical positions, and on discussing whose interests such texts might serve;
2. Identifying the dominant cultural discourses—themes, ideologies, registers—in texts and discussing how these discourses attempt to position and construct readers, their understandings and representations of the world, their social relations, and their identities;
3. Identifying multiple possible readings of texts, on what ideas, themes, characterizations, and possible readers are silent or marginalized;
4. Focusing on identifying the social relations and sources of power and authority of the institutions (*e.g.*, mass media, workplaces, corporations, governments, educational institutions) where particular texts are used; and
5. Focusing on critique, problem solving, and the incorporation of a broad range of texts—traditional and contemporary, canonical and popular, aesthetic and functional—from a range of cultures and institutions. (pp. 452-453)

The final application suggests that virtually any text—even fantasy literature—may be appropriate material to engender critical literacy skills. The aim of critical literacy, according to Luke (2000, p. 453) is to create a classroom environment co-constructed between teacher and students in order to identify ways “texts work to construct their worlds, their cultures, and their identities” and to “use texts as social tools in ways that allow for a reconstruction of these same worlds”. Thus, critical literacy is about *recognition* and *control*—recognition of how a text positions a reader ideologically, and that reader’s ability to control their own ideological position to reject, appropriate, or naturalize the position of the text.

McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) suggest four selection criteria that teachers consider when choosing texts to read in their classrooms when teaching and learning about critical literacy, and while they do not discount the value of other types of texts, they merely point out that texts that fall into one or more of these categories facilitate a critical literacy experience:

- (a) books that disrupt the commonplace;
- (b) books that examine multiple viewpoints;
- (c) books that focus on sociopolitical issues; and
- (d) books that focus on action steps for social justice.

It is important to note that the authors qualify their selection criteria by warning teachers that “it is not the reading of these texts that generates critical consciousness but rather the critical analysis and discussion in which we and our students engage” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 54). The texts that fall into the above categories merely lend themselves well to the kinds of discussions that help students develop a critical consciousness. In other words, books that fall into one or more of these categories are “easy” to use when teaching critical literacy skills. This is a topic taken up by Leland, et al. (1999, p. 72) who, in their investigation of critical literacy, identify particular books, in part, because “they invite specific conversations around specific topics”. Thus, these authors imply that fantasy literature can be an appropriate choice to teach critical literacy skills, especially fantasy literature that meets one or more of the four criteria above.

However, a closer examination of the above parameters reveals that the categories listed are actually skills the authors suggest should be developed in the reader who aspires toward critical literacy, not selection criteria for the texts. That is to say, readers should be able to read a text resistantly (*i.e.*, disrupt the commonplace of the text), examine a text from multiple viewpoints, identify the sociopolitical issues a text either confronts or is informed by, and develop action steps for social justice. Books that offer these elements to students seem to be examples of critically literate *authors* who are aware of the ways texts can position readers and therefore offer resistant *writings*. In other words, the texts that fall into those categories are models of a critically literate *consciousness*. Truly critically literate readers, on the other hand, must

be able to identify those elements in texts that do not necessarily address them explicitly.

McLaughlin and Devoogd (2004) offer several questions, with attendant suggestions, to help students approach a text from a critically literate perspective:

1. Who or what is in the text?
Students can examine gender roles, narrative point of view, ethnicities present, issues of what is seen as “normal” in the text, or the setting.
2. Who or what is missing from the text?
Students may examine the same issues as above, looking instead for elements that are absent from the text.
3. Who or what is marginalized?
Again, the same issues as above can be examined, though students now assess whether an element is ignored, minimized, marginalized, or actively quieted.
4. What does the author want you to think?
Students tease out theme (*i.e.*, the central message of the story) from the text, values supported by the text, and positively- and negatively-viewed character traits.
5. What story might an alternative text tell?
Students imagine changes the text might undergo if any of the following were switched or reversed: Gender, theme, body styles, clothing, ethnicity or race, emotions, relationship or organization, setting, or language.
6. How can information from the text be used to promote justice?
Students examine how their own attitudes or actions might change as a result of reading, how they might treat others differently, how they could change a rule or procedure they view as unjust, or how they could support those who are treated unfairly. (pp. 64-65)

Interestingly, in the final bullet point, the authors suggest a more intrapersonal approach toward social justice. Generally when one thinks of the idea of promoting social justice, one thinks of interacting with those in power to democratize a procedure or to ensure fairness and equitability. The suggestion that students examine their own attitudes or actions implies that social justice should begin with the self, with a personal examination of one’s own values, before one can attempt to promote justice in the larger social context. This makes sense, though no texts explicitly mention self-reflection as a prerequisite to social justice. After all, if a student’s behaviors or attitudes explicitly or implicitly encourage injustice and inequity in their interpersonal interactions in a way

similar to the text, and the student does not question his or her own beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes, then any push for social justice and social equity is rooted in hypocrisy. Therefore, to the above discussion of critical literacy, it should be added that students must read with an eye toward self-examination, a reflection on one's own attitudes and beliefs, changing one's own beliefs and behaviors if necessary to align with a more democratic view of the world. Critical self-examination must take place before one embarks on a path toward social change.

In moving toward a democratic reading that promotes social justice, students must examine the text for connections—literal or figurative—to themselves, to other texts, or to their own world. While exact antecedents of plot elements and characters are not usually extant between the text and the reader's life, the reader must be able to read the text in a larger historical context, with a broader frame of reference and wider applicability. To take an example from William Golding's (1954) novel *Lord of the Flies*, while a student-reader may never have crash-landed on a deserted island with a group of other young boys and tried to build a civilization, they have likely experienced situations in which they and others are isolated from the adult world and must create their own social rules. Students who read from a literal standpoint may not be able to see the broader connections and as a result may not be able to apply any lessons from the text to their own lives. Therefore, making such "extra-textual" connections is an important step toward reading democratically.

Teaching literature through a traditional framework

A crucial aspect of this dissertation will involve an examination of student work to determine the extent to which it exhibits the traits of a critically literate reader. But before discussing relative reading success through critical literacy, it will be important first to distinguish between traditional approaches of exploring and analyzing literature

and the methods entailed by critical literacy so as to more clearly identify success through a “critical literacy curriculum” as opposed to an approach through a traditional curriculum. In other words, a distinction must be drawn between reading for understanding and reading through a critical literacy framework so that the goals of critical literacy are more precisely identified. For the sake of clarity, the former pedagogy will be called a “traditional” approach while the latter will be identified as “critical literacy” approach.

The study of literature involves analyses of literary works from a variety of critical perspectives (Jacobus, 1996), though readers must build their skills, moving from a literal understanding of a text to an artistic or critical one, according to several college textbook anthologies that explore the study of literature (Booth, et al., 2004; Kennedy & Gioia, 2005; Roberts & Jacobs, 2005; Arp & Johnson, 2006). The strategies these authors take in their approach to helping readers understand literature can be discerned, in part, through an analysis of their tables of contents. As an organizational method, the writers of these textbooks quite logically employ “scaffolding” techniques to help readers build upon their understanding of literature by helping students develop concrete reading skills before moving to more abstract ones. All four texts noted above, for example, begin their discussions of fiction with chapters devoted to plot. In all four of the texts⁹, the chapters that discuss plot are followed by chapters exploring character, point of view, and setting.

Beginning a discussion of fiction by exploring the term “plot” makes logical sense because plot—the order in which the events of a story are presented to the reader (Spurgin, 2009)—is generally the most concrete of the elements of fiction, while understanding character (*i.e.*, what defines the characters as well as what drives their actions and motivates them) usually requires some conception of human nature and is

⁹ The third chapter in Arp & Johnson (2006) is devoted to theme, while the fourth is devoted to point of view, representing a slight shift from the other texts. He also devotes less time to the concept of setting, weaving a discussion of setting into his chapter on plot.

often placed within the context of the plot, thus necessitating some degree of interpretation on the part of the reader as he or she moves toward understanding. Point of view, while generally a concrete element of fiction, can be seen in the context of either plot or character. These four elements—plot, character, setting, and point of view—are the basic building blocks of an understanding of literature. Without them, a student is not likely to find success comprehending the more abstract, interpretive elements of a story: theme, irony, symbol, etc. The study of literature through critical literacy also begins with these elements—a *literal* understanding of the text—and for the same reasons.

The traditional approach then moves from the literal to the abstract, exploring such elements as theme, symbol, allegory, tone, and style—elements taken up in each of the textbooks in their latter chapters. These elements are highly contextualized, requiring a clear and thorough understanding of both the details of the story as well as how all the parts work together to create a coherent whole. Many teachers stop here in their elucidations (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), stressing the students' literal understanding of the text and content that students are able to understand the "literariness" of the texts through their interpretations. This traditional approach then moves from the literal to the interpretive, *but stays focused on the text itself*. Success in a traditional classroom may be determined by the extent of a student's ability to understand and articulate...

- the literal elements of the text (*e.g.*, plot, setting, point of view),
- the psychological and motivational elements of the characters, and
- the thematic meaning and significance of the text.

These articulations of textual elements form the basis for the traditional study of literature in high school classrooms in Connecticut, but these articulations are themselves separated from literary theories of criticism, theories which can help

teachers guide students as they read, interpret, and make meaning from various literary texts (Hines & Appleman, 2000). Teachers familiar with literary theories can direct their students toward certain conventions of literature, toward certain signposts in texts, or toward specific approaches that can be taken when examining literature closely. These teachers can enhance the study of literature in their classrooms by helping student recognize certain assumptions and attitudes that often lie hidden in a text, depending upon which theory is being used as a lens to explore the text.

To be sure, numerous theories of literary criticism exist and can be successfully adopted for use in the classroom to help students tease out meaning, but these tend to be more limited in their scope and purpose. For example, New Criticism, a theory made current in the 1940s and derived from the work of I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot (Abrams, 1992), denies the value of examining the external influences on a text and treats the text as an independent entity for study. New Historicism, in many ways opposed to New Criticism, treats the text and the readers as inextricable products of the specific historical time period in which existed (Abrams, 1992). Archetypal criticism explores recurrent narrative features, patterns, characters, and images which are held to be universal, crossing cultures and time periods (Abrams, 1992). These are three of dozens of literary theories which were constructed in part as beliefs systems for the function of literature, as assumptions about the structure of literary works, and as entry points to critique and analyze literature. Critical literacy, on the other hand, is a belief in the purpose of texts as media for communicating an author's beliefs, and it offers tools to help readers recognize and control those messages. In short, literary criticism offers approaches to help readers make meaning of texts; critical literacy offers tools to help students resist texts. In other words, literary criticism offers theories of reading; critical literacy is a theory of teaching making it an appropriate construct to examine pedagogical efficacy.

While some critical theories position the reader as central in making meaning (e.g., reader-response theory and transactional theory), others position the text and reader as historically significant (e.g., New Historicism and Marxist theory), and still others suggest that texts must be examined from the perspective of what group is being marginalized or silenced (e.g., feminism and queer theory), none *combines* all these aspects¹⁰ *with the goal of social justice and equity* except for critical literacy. Other theories could, through unintended applications, be used to promote social justice, but that is not the *raison d'être* of the theory and its application in that direction would be unusual or even surprising.

Critical literacy necessitates the same elements as the traditional approach, but also entails moving beyond the text itself, layering critical theory onto a student's "literary" understanding to facilitate a student's understanding of the significance of the text in the contexts of the student's life, the author's historical period, and contemporary society. It also requires that students make critical judgments about the text by identifying missing elements (*e.g.*, whose voices are absent or marginalized), identifying social and/or political forces represented in the text, re-envisioning the text from alternative view points, and discerning and judging the ethics and morality of the lessons embedded within the text to use as a rubric against which the student's own behavior and perspective may be measured to facilitate self-improvement and, later, social justice. Thus, critical literacy moves from the literal to the interpretive *to the larger world*. Success in a critical literacy-based classroom may be determined by the extent of a student's ability to understand and articulate...

- the literal elements of the text (*e.g.*, plot, setting, point of view),
- the psychological and motivational elements of the characters,

¹⁰ So-called socially-responsible theories, like feminism and queer theory, are focused on social justice as an ultimate goal, but these theories do not position the reader centrally, nor do they privilege an historical reading above the perspective of the group that is marginalized. In this way, those theories are more limited than critical literacy which can be seen as an umbrella theory, with feminism and queer theory being a subset, or application, of critical literacy pedagogy.

- the thematic meaning and significance of the text,
- the political and/or social significance of the text,
- missing or marginalized voices in the text,
- alternative understandings of the text, and
- how the text may facilitate self-improvement and/or social justice.

Critical literacy theory, with its focus on power relations and social equity, shares much with critical discourse analysis, a set of theories centered on the concept of power (Rogers, 2011). As discussed above in this chapter, Gee (1993a) distinguishes between Discourse (with a capital D) by which he suggests a cultural meta-narrative and discourse (with a little d) which refers to a narrative within a particular context (e.g., a classroom conversation). His theory, applied to the social structure of a classroom in a high school, suggests that the discourse between a teacher and her students in many ways is impacted by the Discourse between Teacher and Student, a relationship with implications of power and authority being in the hands of the teacher (in a traditional classroom) and based upon knowledge, social position, age, and control over grades, among other manifestations of power, all of which influence the discourse of the lesson. While this relationship and its influence upon classroom dialogue are fascinating areas of research, this thesis is not intended to address the larger cultural Discourse, nor even analyze the unique cultural discourse of that particular classroom, except to the extent that meaning is created and represented in language (written or oral) and that such meaning illustrates the skills that suggest a critically literate student, according to the theory of critical literacy as discussed above. In other words, this thesis is not interested in the power relationship between student and teacher and how that might influence learning, only in the manifestations of learning itself. Furthermore, visual signs (e.g., gestures, facial expressions, body language, eye contact, nodding, etc.), while they may be imbued with meaning in the classroom discourse (Kress, 2011), will not be analyzed

in this thesis, due in part to the limitations of the scope of analysis as well as to the legal restrictions placed upon a researcher who wishes to videotape a dialogue between student and teacher in a public school classroom.

Teaching critical literacy skills

A teacher's pedagogical approach to teaching critical literacy may involve similar practices to teaching any other skill, though McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) have identified a framework some teachers use to effectively teach critical literacy skills to their students. They suggest using a Guided Comprehension Direct Instruction Framework (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002), a five-step approach involving Explanation, Demonstration, Guidance, Practice, and Reflection, which can help students internalize some of the avenues of thought critical literacy entails. Each of these steps will be explained below.

Because critical literacy entails that students examine a text in a fundamentally different way than they may be used to (*i.e.*, the end result of reading is to see beyond the text, not just see the text itself), a teacher should *explain* the particular critical literacy strategy to students to familiarize them with it and help them see how it can help them approach reading. For example, a teacher who wants to introduce students to the concept of gender bias in stories should explain what is meant by the term gender bias (*i.e.*, that it is the elevation, preferential treatment, respect, or validation of one gender above another, that it can be unconscious on the part of the author, that it can control the perspective through which a story is told and hence the way it is perceived by the reader, and that it limits the way a reader experiences the events of the story, among other things), then explain that this is one way the class will approach the reading of this particular text.

Since the strategies taught may be unfamiliar to students, a teacher should *demonstrate* the strategy in practice through modeling it for students. This can be accomplished by reading the text aloud with students while noting (to continue the example above) aspects of gender bias in the text and the impact on the reader, and showing students how a critically literate reader would think and what they might notice as significant while reading a story. Metaphorically-speaking, through this method, a teacher shows students an alternate path through the sometimes-dense wood of a text, pointing out some of the meaningful landmarks along the way.

Once the students have a general idea of the strategy and how a reader can use it, the teacher can place students into small groups or with partners and *guide* them through the text, pausing at intervals while the students respond in writing to some of the same types of landmarks the teacher had noted during the previous step. In this way, students engage in the same type of reading as the teacher and can share their observations with each other, thereby clarifying and strengthening their learning while the teacher can solicit ideas from each small group. This step allows the teacher to guide the practice of the students to make sure all students are implementing the strategy appropriately.

Next, the students may be allowed to *practice* the reading strategy independently or with a partner, depending upon their level of competence and their comfort with the strategy. This step requires students to engage with a text using the same approach as the teacher, attempting to internalize the strategy while being monitored less intensively by the teacher. Success can be ascertained by the teacher through subsequent whole-class discussions or through independent written analyses by students.

Finally, once students have internalized the strategy, a teacher should emphasize the personal significance of the strategy in the life of each student by having students *reflect* on the use of the strategy and how it can help them understand a text in a way that is more meaningful to them personally. This last, important step illustrates the

value of using this particular critical literacy approach as the students read the text.

Each of these steps, progressing appropriately toward mastery, help students learn new avenues of thought as they approach literature in a more broadly contextualized way.

Another approach which is less focused on articulating and explaining specific critical literacy strategies involves making the reading of a text about an exploration of the text within a larger context, instead of just analyzing the text from a “literary” standpoint (Hines & Appleman, 2000; Shannon & Labbo, 2002). Employing this strategy means that a teacher moves beyond requiring that students understand the text from a literal standpoint (*i.e.*, plot, point of view, and setting), or even that they analyze the text’s abstract component parts (*i.e.*, character, theme, symbol, allegory, irony, tone, and style) in relation to the whole. Instead of reading the text in isolation, the teacher might create—or encourage students to research—an historical context for the novel using nonfiction information, or a teacher might use connective texts to broaden student perspectives about the ideas of the text. For example, such an approach to the reading of Ralph Ellison’s (1947) *Invisible Man*, a novel of African-American alienation and repression in mid-Twentieth Century America, might involve a teacher bringing in art work from the Harlem Renaissance, poems and short stories written by African-American authors that address similar themes as Ellison’s novel, nonfiction articles discussing historical events, or speeches by famous African-American leaders in order to immerse the students in an historical context and give them a broader perception of the novel.

Another approach to teaching students about critical literacy might involve framing the reading around a specific critical literacy perspective (Prothero, 1990; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), such as an exploration of identities (*e.g.*, natives vs. immigrants, males vs. females, urban vs. rural inhabitants, Pakistani vs. Indian) as they are presented in the text. This approach might involve using pre-reading activities such

as journals, free writes, opinionnaires, checklists, or anticipation guides, activities designed to encourage students to examine their beliefs and opinions about a certain topic before reading the text, and to focus their reading on particular aspects of a text. For example, students might be asked how they feel about sacrificing their personal privacy in exchange for increased public safety, about the appropriateness of using torture on someone who is a perceived threat to our government or its citizens, or about the importance of language as a way to develop—or limit—their ideas. Such questions might help guide the reading of George Orwell's (1949) novel *1984*, framing the story around larger issues of privacy vs. security, torture, and the importance of language.

Whole-class discussions using questions that address specific aspects of critical literacy (Lewison, et al., 2002) are also appropriate methods of teaching critical literacy skills. Through this method, a teacher can model the types of questions a critically literate reader might ask themselves while reading a text. This method is intended to help create a habit of critical thinking in students. Instead of verbal responses, students could also be encouraged to create free and open responses to the text through class and small-group discussions, Think-Pair-Share responses, free writing, play-acting, picture-responses, role-playing, etc. In addition to addressing issues in the text, these questions can help students learn to critique the text (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), using the story to challenge their perceptions—and the author's—about life and human nature.

Yet another strategy to teach critical literacy skills is to encourage students to make personal connections to the text (Salvio, 1994; Gaughan, 1999; Lewison, et al., 2002; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Using this strategy, a teacher provides opportunities for students to respond to the themes and issues of a text, finding points of contact between the text and their own experiences. The role of the teacher is to ask the questions that lead to these connections being made and to validate the ideas, information, and connections that students bring to the conversation.

While many of the above strategies can be used without critical literacy in mind, the final strategy takes advantage of a particular aspect of critical literacy, one that foregrounds the idea of authors making narrative choices and what implications those choices have for the narrative and, ultimately, for the reader. Because a story is told from a particular perspective, either from a character in the story (*i.e.*, first-person or third-person limited) or through a disembodied narrative voice (*i.e.*, omniscient or objective), the reader experiences the story through an author-selected paradigm which carries with it values. Some of the values embodied by the narrative may be employed by the author for literary effect, some may be an intentional rendering of the author's own biases, and some may be completely unintentional on the part of the author. The critically literate reader sees little difference among these, recognizing only the existence of bias in a text. In order to facilitate recognition of bias, a teacher can ask students to re-tell stories from different perspectives (or "voices") (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004) to demonstrate the effect this bias may have on the story and the reader. For example, students reading the story of "The Three Little Pigs," in which the title characters flee in terror from one house to the next to escape a wolf who keeps destroying their houses, may be asked to envision the story from the perspective of the wolf to try to understand his side of the story. Students in a high school class may be asked to consider how William Golding's (1954) novel *Lord of the Flies*, which relates the story of a plane crash onto a desert island of an all-boys school, would be different if the students were all female, or if the genders were mixed. This activity highlights the impact Golding's selection of gender had on the novel's themes, and illustrates to students the importance of author's choices and hidden bias that might exist in the text.

Summary

Critical literacy is built upon the premise that all texts consciously or unconsciously embody and even promote social and political perspectives, and that the reader is “positioned” to accept those perspectives. If, as Freire (1970, 1976) suggests, the goal of education is “human liberation,” then critical literacy helps liberate the reader from enslavement to the ideas embraced by the text, enabling the reader to recognize the influence of the text and consider the author’s perspective in a larger context instead of blindly accepting their beliefs as gospel—in short, to think freely. As noted above, critical literacy provides readers with the tools to recognize how a text positions them and to control their own ideological position. What crucial skills, then, should a critically literate reader possess? How can we identify when a student exhibits critical literacy skills? Critical literacy means that a reader must be able to:

- Recognize the social and political forces the text promotes (*i.e.*, the **dominant cultural discourse** within a text and the “hidden agenda” that drives the discourse) and the sources of power within the text, and recognize how the text “positions” the reader to accept the privileged perspective;
- Identify the diversity or uniformity of **voices represented** in the text: which voices are being heard or validated, and which voices are being silenced or marginalized;
- Articulate the **complexity of issues and themes** explored by the text, and further develop (*i.e.*, problematize) those which may be oversimplified or presented one-dimensionally by the text;
- **Disrupt the commonplace** by articulating alternate ways the text can be interpreted to yield multiple (or resistant) readings or re-envision the text from alternate perspectives; and

- Use the text as a springboard for **self-reflection**, considering how the text challenges or confirms readers' perceptions of themselves and their own ideologies, especially as a method of advocating social justice or helping to democratize the world.

Having discussed the philosophy of critical literacy, the next section will define how the term *fantasy literature* will be employed in this thesis. Representative¹¹ fantasy literature texts will then be analyzed in order to demonstrate that they contain elements which enable them to be used in a curriculum of critical literacy, addressing in each text all or most of the five key components listed above. Finally, ways a teacher can use the texts in the classroom to engender critical literacy skills in students will be illustrated.

¹¹ The novels chosen represent a range of texts: fantasy intended for children and for adults, and fantasy published in the early- and in the late-Twentieth century

Chapter Three: Fantasy Literature

Numerous attempts have already been made to establish an all-encompassing definition of fantasy literature (Fredericks, 1978; Petzold, 1986; Clute & Grant, 1997; Stableford, 2005; D’Amassa, 2006). A brief overview of contemporary views of fantasy literature will be discussed with the ultimate aim of providing a working definition of the term. Crafting a satisfying definition of fantasy literature is challenging, as such stories may incorporate elements of mythology, folktale and folklore, legend, horror and the supernatural, romance, and even history and science fiction (Thomas, 2003; D’Amassa, 2006; Drout, 2006). As a result, fantasy is often defined in relation to other genres, especially science fiction (D’Amassa, 2006; Drout, 2006), fairy tales, Gothic stories (Petzold, 1986), and especially realistic fiction (Stableford, 2005).

In distinguishing fantasy from science fiction, Drout (2006) notes that fantasy is usually set in an imaginary past, while science fiction is set in an imaginary future. He also points out that the source of the “magic” inherent in most fantasy novels is never explained. For example, the reader does not discover exactly *how* the magical “whatsit” functions (though we may learn *what* those functions are); its strange workings are merely accepted at face value and virtually without question: “It’s magic!” is the answer. However, in science fiction stories, the technological oddities generally have some basis in real (if largely theoretical) science and are elucidated for the reader: “The ion drive works by bringing positive and negative neutrinos in close proximity and they drive the ship by...”. The “magic” is explained. According to Fredericks (1978, p. 41), “critics wish to reserve some special dimension of ‘credibility’ for science fiction, as distinct from the ‘incredibility’ of fantasy.” Thus, science fiction worlds exist “as more or less extensions of our own”; which is to say, they are ontologically similar.

Clute and Grant tacitly reinforce the idea of defining fantasy in terms of realism in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), arguing that the term “fantasy literature” in fact had no applicability before the Age of Enlightenment (*i.e.*, the late 17th Century) because “fantasy literature” essentially exists in opposition to the notion of “realistic” (*i.e.*, mimetic) literature, and before the Enlightenment there was allegedly no significant separation or distinction between realistic and fantastic elements of literature. Therefore, fantasy literature was considered realistic literature, not separate from it nor in opposition to it. This argument is particularly interesting in that modern scholars sometimes view fantasy literature as inferior to realistic works, while earlier views (according to Clute and Grant [1997]) accept realistic and fantastic literatures as having comparable literary legitimacy¹². Their argument also implies that one may disregard most pre-17th Century literatures that contain fantastical elements such as monsters, wizards, and magic (*e.g.*, *The Iliad*, *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queen*, and the works of Shakespeare) from consideration as “fantasy literature.”

Still, it remains that fantasy, if it is not defined by realism, at least is set in opposition to it in modern times. However, one of the problems with this fantasy-realism dichotomy has to do with the nature of literary invention itself: even the most “realistic” piece of fiction is still an artificial, fictive product of the author’s mind (Drout, 2006). Given this critique, what then separates literary fantasy from realism? Part of the answer may be found not in the text itself but in both the author and the reader. A fictional story may be considered realistic, in part, if the author intends it as such and the audience receives it as such (Drout, 2006). By extension, the same may be said of fantasy literature. Though this is hardly helpful in moving us closer to a definition of fantasy literature, it does provide support for Clute and Grant’s (1997) argument because if no distinction is made between realistic and fantastic literature,

¹² A more detailed discussion of the conflicting perspectives of fantasy and realistic literatures will taken up below.

then an author could not have *intended* his work, nor the audience received it, as one or the other.

Another part of the answer to what separates fantasy from realism in literature lies in the text itself. Elements such as mythic structures, heroic cycles, and religious and social commentary abound in fantasy works (Thomas, 2003), though certainly texts exist which contain such elements yet might not be ascribed to the fantasy genre proper¹³. To say that fantasy novels contain heroes, swordplay, castles, wizards, and other particular elements would be similarly unproductive as Petzold (1986) pointed out. Identifying thematic and structural elements might prove more rewarding, and for this task Tolkien's seminal work on fantasy, "On Fairy-Stories" (1939), can provide some illumination. In this much-discussed essay, Tolkien asserts that for a tale to be considered a fairy-story (*i.e.*, a work of fantasy), it must be presented as being "true" in the sense that the reader may take it as an intended representation of a reality defined by the author, as opposed to a fanciful dream-story akin to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) in which the originator of the story awakens in "reality" only to discover that tale was merely a dream. In the Tolkienian sense, a "true" story is one that is meant by the author, and taken by the reader, to exist as a fictional reality created by the author.

To create this truth, according to Tolkien, an author in the Primary World¹⁴ must create a Secondary World which requires Secondary Belief—a willingness on the part of the reader to accept the premises of a work of fiction, even if they are fantastical or impossible. If the Secondary Belief is stretched too far and the reader experiences a moment of disbelief, the spell is broken and the art of the work has failed. Therefore, in a work of fantasy, the author must create a reality inside the text in which everything

¹³ The Piers Anthony Apprentice Adept series (*i.a.*, *Split Infinity* [1980]) and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (*i.a.*, *The Golden Compass* [1995]) books are examples, as they are combinations of science fiction and fantasy and might best be labeled as "science fantasy".

¹⁴ Tolkien intended this to mean our contemporary world of reality in which the author resides and works, as opposed to the Secondary World which is the creation of the author.

behaves in accordance with the rules that the author has established. That is, everything must be “true” as far as the expectations and requirements of the Secondary World are concerned in order to maintain the Secondary Belief.

Still, given the fact that, as noted above, authors of “realistic literature” must also maintain Secondary Belief, Tolkien’s concept of “truth” does not distinguish fantasy from realism in literature, except insofar as the difficulty of maintaining the reader’s belief in the Secondary World, a belief that is stretched and is quite difficult to achieve according to Tolkien, is much more challenging for writers of fantasy than writers of realism. This is due to the unusual—one might say *unique*—elements of fantasy literature, elements that are often unfamiliar to the reader and may not be entirely rational or obedient to natural laws as we know them (D’Ammassa, 2006), elements such as fire-breathing dragons, virtually-invulnerable goblins, talking animals, and spell-casting wizards who appear to defy the laws of thermodynamics. This “unusual” nature of fantasy elements and the unfamiliarity of the reader to the Secondary World, create an “arresting strangeness,” according to Tolkien (1939) which is a critical feature of fantasy works, though he notes that many people dislike being ‘arrested,’ a fact which may partly explain the strong negative reactions some people have toward works of fantasy. Still, this “strangeness” is part and parcel of fantasy literature, and the unfamiliarity of the Secondary World both helps and hinders the writer of fantasy: helping by piquing the curiosity of readers already enticed by the Secondary World; hindered by the difficulty an author faces in maintaining Secondary Belief in that World.

In his *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature* (2005), Stableford notes that while Geoffrey Chaucer (c. late 14th Century) was the first known writer in (Middle) English to use the word *fantasye*, he was referring to “strange and bizarre notions that have no basis in everyday experience” (xxxv). His definition seems to implicitly

compare fantasy to realism in that such qualified adjectives as “strange” and “bizarre” only make sense when compared to “normalcy,” not in any absolute sense. Again, fantasy is defined in terms of reality.

Thomas (2003, p. 60) provides a more denotative definition, saying that most works of fantasy are “usually medieval in setting but not always, . . . the cultures have not yet reached an age of technological sophistication, . . . [and they] deal with some aspect of the supernatural world that has some historical basis in human myth—fairies and elves, for example. Fantasy novels are set in worlds that readers are familiar with, either because they can see it out of the window or have some primal memory of it.” While her definition has the advantage of brevity and clarity, and is applicable to most traditional works of fantasy, it remains overly narrow, excluding more works than it should. For example, her definition cannot be applied to the most successful work of the 21st Century so far: J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (*i.a.*, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* [1997]), a series of books scholars such as Drout (2006) consider as fantasy, yet which does not have a medieval setting and whose wizard culture has in fact “reached an age of technological sophistication” (though it refuses to embrace that technology). The definition also lacks a theoretical foundation, being rooted as it is in subject matter and form: Are the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, for example, works of fantasy? What about the fables of Aesop? Are Susan Cooper’s *The Dark is Rising* novels (*i.a.*, *Over Sea, Under Stone* [1966]) fantasy, even though some are set in modern times? And *must* the author incorporate “some aspects of the supernatural world that has some historical basis in human myth,” or may not authors create their own, unique creatures that manifest in no human myth?

Kennedy and Gioia (2009), in *Literature: An introduction to fiction, poetry, drama, and writing* offer a definition of fantasy literature:

A narrative that depicts events, characters, or places, that could not exist in the real world. Fantasy has limited interest in portraying experience

realistically. Instead, it freely pursues the possibilities of the imagination. Fantasy usually includes elements of magic or the supernatural. Sometimes it is used to illustrate a moral message as in fables. Fantasy is a type of romance that emphasizes wish fulfillment (or nightmare fulfillment) instead of verisimilitude. (p. G12)

This definition, however, is broad, being applicable to fables (admittedly), fairy tales, horror, and even magical realism by such authors as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Salman Rushdie, and Italo Calvino.

Petzold (1986) also notes the difficulty in defining fantasy and bemoans the lack of success of other scholars in doing so. Because of fantasy's disinterest in verisimilitude, he contrasts fantasy with realism to help develop his definition, borrowing heavily from Tolkien's (1939) concept of the Secondary World which Petzold refers to as the "totality of imaginary characters, actions, and settings evoked by literary discourse and which has an ontological status radically different from the real (or 'primary') world" (Petzold, 1986, p. 14). Although he claims that his definition "expands" on Tolkien's meaning, Petzold's definition is really nothing more than a clarification, since Tolkien's use of the term in "On Fairy-Stories" clearly implies a fully-realized, entirely populated Secondary World.

Setting aside this term, Petzold does offer some qualifications of fantasy works in a typical juxtaposition of fantasy with realism, noting that fantasy "needs to express a *conscious* departure from, even a rebellion against, the principles of mimesis" (Petzold, 1986, p. 15, emphasis in original), principles which seem to be mandatory in works of mainstream (*i.e.*, realistic) literature. His observation suggests that fantasy does not attempt to recreate reality as we know it, instead developing its own reality which may be different from our world¹⁵.

Another important qualification regarding fantasy is his observation that the "basic condition of fantasy is an attitude, shared by the author and reader, that admits

¹⁵ As opposed to *realism* which may be seen as embracing mimetic principles in an attempt to represent or re-create the reality of the world as humans know it.

fabulous and supernatural beings (other than God) have no objective existence while at the same time insisting that art nevertheless has the right to invoke and describe such beings” (Petzold, 1986, p. 16). This is critical because a reader’s willing suspension of disbelief that hinges upon the author’s successful creation of the Secondary World necessitates that the author, particularly in a fantasy work, be able to create “fabulous and supernatural” creatures that have a physical reality in the Secondary World and which the reader, the author, and the denizens of that world admit as manifest.

Because the concept of the Secondary World is so critical to the fantasy genre and to the establishment of a working definition of it, a moment should be taken to discuss some of the types of secondary worlds authors create. Stableford (2005) divides fantasy novels into three broad categories: Intrusive, Portal, and Immersive, all of which require some discussion since an understanding of them helps define the genre.

Intrusive fantasy novels establish themselves in a world similar to that of the reader, albeit distanced geographically and (often) historically. In this type of setting, the modern (or Primary) world is represented as having suffered from a “magical erosion” of sorts, but in many other ways is largely recognizable to readers, some novels introducing only a single element of fantasy into an otherwise mimetic representation of reality. An example of this type of fantasy work is T.H. White’s novel collection *The Once and Future King* (1958) which is set in an imagined medieval England during the reign of King Arthur. Another example, set in the modern world, is J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* (*i.a.*, 1997) series. Rowling’s books (termed “wainscot” fantasy by Clute [1997] because the magical element of the Primary World exists as a sub-culture of the dominant, yet mundane, civilization) involve magical humans (*i.e.*, wizards and witches), mythical/supernatural monsters (*e.g.*, basilisks, three-headed dogs, trolls, werewolves, ghosts, etc.), and demi-human species (*e.g.*, naiads, giants, mermaids, etc.) existing in a geographically separate niche in our Primary World to which non-magical

humans are largely ignorant. In fact, an important element of tension within the novel involves the constant, tangential points of contact—the “rubblings” of the worlds—that both sides attempt to prevent or at least mitigate.

Portal fantasy novels are those in which the reader is led through a gateway or “portal” into another Secondary World (Stableford, 2005), a world in which the fantasy culture is pervasive and generally ignorant of the portal. Examples of this kind of fantasy include C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* (*i.a.*, 1950) books in which the Pevensie children travel through the back of a wardrobe into the magical land of Narnia. Other portals used by Lewis in his series include a picture, a door in a brick wall, pools of water, and magical rings. Another example of a portal fantasy includes the Thomas Covenant novels of Stephen R. Donaldson (*i.a.*, 1977) which describe the adventures of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever as he travels between the Primary World of Earth and the Secondary World called The Land. This type of fantasy creates an ontological separation between the Primary and the Secondary Worlds.

Finally, *immersive fantasy* novels are those in which the author has created an entirely self-contained Secondary World into which the reader is immediately and wholly thrust; in this type of fantasy, the author is expected to provide some element of mediation to help the reader make the transition from contemporary reality (*i.e.*, the Primary World) to the Secondary World (Stableford, 2005). A famous example of this type of fantasy is J.R.R. Tolkien’s novel *The Hobbit* (1937) which is set in the fictional world of Middle-earth and is mediated by Bilbo Baggins, a recognizably middle-class person who possesses no small measure of contemporary, middle class social mores. His ignorance of the larger world helps orient the reader to Middle-earth, yet his knowledge of some of the more unusual inhabitants of that world—goblins, elves, giants, and dragons—helps the reader accept the reality of the setting and thus suspend their disbelief.

Tolkien's (1939) essay "On Fairy-Stories" provides a philosophical discussion of the goals of fantasy literature which include *Recovery*, *Escape*, and *Consolation*. Recovery means seeing things again clearly, or renewing one's vision of the world. For Tolkien, this meant that fantasy should help readers re-engage with the reality of life, providing perspective and enlarging one's worldview through a development of the reader's ontological understanding and a refreshing of the reader's sensibilities. Essentially, Recovery means opening one's eyes again to the world as if for the first time, like a person who, slowly blinded by cataracts over the course of years, suddenly regains their vision and stands blinking in the light of a world renewed to them: they had looked at the world but had never really *seen* it.

Escape is one of the main functions of fantasy and is connected with the idea of *nostalgia* which, as Drout (2006) defines it, refers to the feeling of desire to return home to a place you cannot return—yet Tolkien's Escape seems to enable that return, vicariously and temporarily, through the fantasy story. Escape from prison, or ugliness, or sorrow, or banality, or death is not a bad thing, Tolkien notes, nor is the pleasurable distraction from our mundane world that is provided by fantasy. Though we may escape into a narrative of literary realism, the shadings of nostalgia may not be present. Fantasy, with its tendency toward recreating a real or imagined past in some way, embraces the idea of a *nostos*, an emotional "homecoming" of sorts.

Finally, Consolation refers to the "Consolation of the Happy Ending," of the "Joy beyond the walls of the world" (Tolkien, 1939, p. 153) for which Tolkien coined the word *eucatastrophe*¹⁶, meaning a good catastrophe, a happy ending, a sudden joyous turn similar to a *deus ex machina*. It is the Consolation offered by a fantasy story that helps provide the reader's satisfaction with the story and their appreciation of the Escape and Recovery the tale supplies. A fantasy story, Tolkien cautions, must not

¹⁶ As opposed to *dyscatastrophe*, a bad or destructive catastrophe that results in ruin.

deny the existence of dyscatastrophe and, in fact, must embrace it, for the possibility of sorrow and failure must exist if the reader is to feel the joy of deliverance, though it does deny universal final defeat.

Fantasy literature defined

For purposes of this research project, the following definition of *fantasy literature* will be used: Fantasy literature is a type of literary narrative or poem that incorporates a Secondary World that has an ontological separation from our own world, and has an internal consistency. Unlike realism, fantasy has limited interest in verisimilitude, often incorporating such elements as monsters or supernatural creatures (*e.g.*, dragons, centaurs, goblins, minotaurs, etc.), mythic demi-human species (*e.g.*, elves, dwarves, fairies, giants, etc.), magical items, and magic spells. The cultures that populate the Secondary World generally lack technological sophistication and usually reside in a medieval setting. Fantasy works often deal with archetypal images, mythic structures, and the struggle between Good and Evil.

Some important clarifications and qualifications remain, however. As noted above, the Secondary World referred to can be presented as an imagined past or present-day Earth (*i.e.*, Intrusive fantasy), a world parallel to our own (*i.e.*, Portal fantasy), or an entirely self-contained universe in which the reader is fully immersed (*i.e.*, Immersive fantasy). The importance of the credibility of the Secondary World cannot be understated, especially considering that Tolkien (1939) suggested that the relative quality of a work of fantasy can be measured by its success in engrossing the reader in the story such that the reader willingly suspends his/her disbelief sufficiently to accept the reality of the Secondary World. Since, as Tolkien points out, one of the primary goals of fantasy literature is Escape, then it follows that a story in which belief in the Secondary World is not totalizing fails to enable the reader to escape for the duration of

the story. Some of the best works of fantasy support belief in the Secondary World even *after* the reader completes the tale.

Tolkien's conception that fantasy literature should provide Recovery, Escape, and Consolation for the reader is not incorporated into the above definition because they are not *necessary* elements of the story, elements that *define* the text as fantasy, nor should they be required as goals of a fantasy novel. They represent a critical lens through which to view a text *if one agrees with that perspective*. An analogous situation can be seen with regard to feminist criticism. A feminist critic would not *require* the presence of female characters in order to categorize a text as a novel. Instead, the feminist critic would use the roles (or the absence) of female characters in a novel to be a standard of relative literary quality of the work and as a basis of criticism and analysis. Recovery, Escape, and Consolation identify the *purpose* of a work of fantasy, they are not defining characteristics without which a text cannot be considered fantasy. According to Tolkien, a text that does not contain these elements (or does not successfully realize them) can be considered a work of fantasy, but it fails as a work of art—the *quality* of the text suffers. But those are goals that Tolkien has arbitrarily established, not the goals of the author of the work. They are criteria for judging a text, not characteristics for defining it.

A pervasive conception of fantasy literature is the critical and popular opinion of fantasy as superficial childish nonsense, the fact that “the genre itself continues to be dismissed as escapist fluff” (Thomas, 2003, p. 60). This issue is central to this thesis, part of which must be devoted to evaluating whether fantasy is a valuable literary genre worthy of study in a high school classroom. Incorporated into the title of this thesis is a presumption that many teachers—and many scholars—would probably not perceive as warranted: the designation of fantasy fiction as “literature”. It is certainly a title that Burton Raffel (1968) disputed when applied to Tolkien's (1954, 1955) *The Lord of the*

Rings, a work written by arguably the greatest and most successful fantasy writer of the twentieth century and subject of a scholarly work by Shippey (2002) impressively entitled *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. While the term “literature” (as opposed to “fiction”) connotes a value judgment of the aesthetic merits of a text, it is part of the goal of this thesis to explore the possibility of validating works of fantasy as useful for literary study to engender critical literacy within high school students. Although the purpose here is not to develop an extensive argument to define the term “literature” but to discuss the educational value of these works of fantasy in helping students think critically about themselves, their world, and the texts with which they interact, the concept of “literary value” is important to this thesis, and the term will be framed more precisely below, specifically as it relates to works of fantasy.

The idea of the relative literary inferiority of fantasy compared to realism was emphasized by novelist Henry James (1843-1916), a proponent of realist writing and who wrote novels in the realist style¹⁷ (Drout, 2006). This disaffection toward fantasy began earlier than James’s influence could explain, for since the mid-Eighteenth Century, “discussion of fantasy literature has been almost entirely a matter of resistance to disdain rather than the celebration of innovation” (Stableford, 2005, p. xliii) and “the notion of ‘fantasy’ comes ready-tainted with implications of unworthiness, of a failure of some alleged duty of the human mind to concentrate on the realities of existence” (Stableford, 2005, xxxv). Thus, from its earliest days¹⁸, fantasy has been disparaged and degraded, held inferior to realism and scorned as “self-indulgent folly” (Stableford, 2005).

Tolkien himself, called by some scholars the ‘father of modern fantasy’ (Drout, 2006) and the ‘author of the century’ (Shippey, 2002), noted that “to many,

¹⁷ Whether James wrote realist novels because he believed in their superiority over fantasy, or he was a proponent of realism because he wanted to privilege his own literary work is a matter of debate that will not be taken up here.

¹⁸ If we accepted Clute & Grant’s (1997) argument that fantasy did not exist before the Enlightenment (*i.e.*, c. 1650)

Fantasy...has seemed suspect, if not illegitimate” or childish (Tolkien, 1939). But fantasy, he points out, is founded upon Reason and

the keener and clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make...for creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it. So upon logic was founded the nonsense that displays itself in the tales and rhymes of Lewis Carroll. If men really could not distinguish between frogs and men, fairy-stories about frog-kings would not have arisen. (p. 144)

Fantasy, Tolkien suggests, is not mere childish whimsy. It is founded upon, and perhaps even reacts against, logic and reason, enriching the banal existence of Man by holding up a mirror of Fantasy to his prosaic visage so that he could see himself more clearly. Fantasy requires a recognition of reality: it is not a denial of reality.

In his *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature* (2005), Stableford summarizes an argument which privileges realistic fiction over fantasy, saying essentially that people tend to read realistic novels because the characters inhabit a world similar to ours and that by getting to know them we can understand more about ourselves and others around us in a way that reading fantasy literature could never allow because of the foreignness of the setting and characters. Hence, fantasy can be seen as distancing and even alienating. While Stableford admits the first part of the argument (though he qualifies it by saying that it were dangerous to assume that we could know each other as well as we know literary characters, a criticism which limits the value of the argument in denying fantasy literature equal footing with realistic), he notes that “there is not the slightest reason why we cannot learn just as much from hypothetical encounters and adventures of various improbable and impossible kinds as from thoroughly mundane ones” (Stableford, 2005, p. xlvii), suggesting that the truths fantasy reveals about the human condition through elves, dwarves, hobbits, and goblins are as valid as those revealed through the lens of contemporary human protagonists.

Summary

This chapter has examined some key definitions of fantasy literature and has offered a working definition to be applied to works examined in this research. Some of the key features of this working definition of fantasy as a literary genre include the following:

- A. Incorporation into a fictional text of a Secondary World that has an internal consistency;
- B. The inclusion of supernatural or “un-worldly” elements such as monsters or other creatures (*e.g.*, dragons, centaurs, goblins, minotaurs, etc.), mythic demi-human species (*e.g.*, elves, dwarves, fairies, giants, etc.), magical items, or magical spells;
- C. A general lack of technological sophistication such as might exist in a medieval setting; and
- D. The inclusion of common thematic elements that generally occur in works of fantasy, such as archetypal imagery, mythic structures, and the struggle between Good and Evil.

The next chapter will apply the key elements of critical literacy discussed in Chapter Two with five works of fantasy from the Twentieth century—J.R.R. Tolkien’s (1937) *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954, 1955), C.S. Lewis’s (1950) *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Ursula K. Le Guin’s (1968) *A Wizard of Earthsea*, and J.K. Rowling’s (1997) *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*—all of which meet the criteria established in the definition of fantasy literature above. Tolkien’s works (A) take place in Middle-earth, (B) include elves, dwarves, goblins, orcs, dragons, wizards, magical spells, and magical items, (C) lack technological sophistication, and (D) define and explore Good vs. Evil within a mythic structure. The *Earthsea* books (A) take place in the imaginary world of Earthsea, (B) include dragons, wizards, magic items,

and magical spells, (C) lack technological sophistication, and (D) rely heavily upon archetypal imagery and explore the relationship between Good and Evil. The *Narnia* series (A) takes place largely in the world of Narnia (which is accessed in a variety of ways by children of our world), (B) employs dozens of mythical creatures such as minotaurs, centaurs, hippogriffs, witches, talking animals, dwarves, elves, goblins, etc., (C) lacks technological sophistication, and (D) explores a morality which revolves around the struggle between Good and Evil. Finally, while the *Harry Potter* books (A) take place in the recognizably modern world (largely in Great Britain), the world in which Hogwarts School for Wizards exists is clearly intended to be parallel to our own world and is entered through a portal (*i.e.*, Platform 9^{3/4}) which creates an ontological separation from the mundane world, (B) includes goblins, giants, dragons, house elves, mermaids, wizards and witches, magical spells, and magical items, (C) lacks technological sophistication, and (D) explores the relationship between Good and Evil within a Bildungsroman framework. Each work will be analyzed for the appropriateness of its use in the classroom in helping to engender skills of critical literacy in high school students.

Chapter Four: Fantasy Literature and Critical Literacy

The main investigation of this dissertation is to what extent fantasy literature, as a genre, can foster critical literacy in students and is therefore appropriate to include in a secondary English classroom. Works of fantasy may in fact be particularly appropriate texts to use because of the compelling nature of their narratives and characters, the importance of the themes fantasy texts generally develop, the intended audience (*i.e.*, typically teens and young adults), their cultural significance, and their literary value. A novel may be incredibly popular among students, but unless it challenges the students to think through the ambiguities of the text, unless it can help students develop a more multi-dimensional perspective on the world, unless it helps them understand and appreciate the complexity of literature, unless it asks difficult questions about life, human nature, philosophy, and experience, then its value in the classroom is limited. Additionally, these works must also address some of the key questions of critical literacy as outlined at the end of Chapter Two.

Over the years, fantasy literature has attracted a body of scholarly criticism devoted to illuminating the works of fantasy not unlike critical analyses of classic and canonical literary works. Critical analyses of fantasy are devoted to uncovering themes and patterns (Shippey 2002; Drout, 2006; Croft, 2009, 2010, 2011), narrative complexities (Bullard, 2011; Northrup, 2004), archetypal representations (Rawls, 2008; Riga, 2008; Brown, 2006; Hiley, 2004), sub-categories of the fantasy genre (Le Lievre, 2003; Clute & Grant, 1997; Stableford, 2005), cultural and linguistic commentary (Comoletti & Drout, 2001; Fredrick & McBride, 2007; Livingston, 2012; Shippey, 1977), and other philosophical inquires (Flieger, 2007, 2009; Fife, 2006; Hull, 1986) taken up by the authors of fantasy literature. In the following pages, I will briefly discuss the literary depth of fantasy works in general. The remainder of the chapter will

examine the academic value of the fantasy works of Tolkien, Lewis, Le Guin, and Rowling by analyzing them in terms of critical literacy, asking whether these works contain sufficient essential elements of critical literacy to warrant using them in the classroom. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the value of using these particular representative works of fantasy in the classroom, demonstrating their depth and complexity as well as their potential to elicit discussion and analysis among high school students.

One of the most interesting aspects of fantasy literature is that it tends to ask the “big” questions of life, forcing students to consider such topics as the nature of good and evil, universal morality, the afterlife, heroism and the quality of one’s character, the role of the individual in society, and the importance of cultural diversity. The fantasy novels discussed in this dissertation address these issues and more in the context of rich, compelling narratives. Whether the text offers definitive answers or merely illustrates the complexity of the issues, students can find numerous opportunities to engage with the text in writing—challenging the author, pondering the questions raised, acknowledging the author’s viewpoint, or analyzing the diversity of views presented among several of the texts.

Additionally, works of fantasy provide an escape from our often prosaic existences. The concept of “escape” in literature, as discussed by J.R.R. Tolkien in his landmark essay “On Fairy-Stories” (1939), is often used in opposition to “interpret,” where the former is meant to indicate superficiality, immaturity, vulgarity, and ignorance, and the latter refers to complexity, maturity, aesthetic refinement, and erudition. Tolkien attempted to divest from the term “escape” the disparagement and contempt which it endured (and still endures, to some extent, today) in connection to literature, and reinvested the word with a connotation of respectful appreciation for

describing the way a text can provide release from banality into the supernatural—a world of surprise and invention quite beyond our own.

This last point emphasizes the element of unfamiliarity inherent in many fantasy works. Not only is the *literary* landscape of the fantasy genre unusual, but the *fictional* landscape of the fantasy world of the novel is often unique and quite unlike our own. While this point may seem self-evident, it has interesting repercussions in the classroom, where students are learning to decode the complex literary conventions of canonical texts. Students reading William Golding's (1954) novel *Lord of the Flies*, for example, may have difficulty comprehending the symbolic interplay among the boys on the island, but this task is much easier given the fact that those boys interact on a world without magic, where the physics within the literary representation is understood and shared by the reader, where no trolls, witches, or dragons exist, where the land itself is not an active participant in the action, where words have no power of themselves to change physical reality. In the world of fantasy, where all of the above elements may in fact have a basis in the reality of the text, students are forced to read the text more closely, participating more actively in the author-reader dialogue in order to understand this foreign world which may not conform to the literary or mundane conventions they have become used to. The students' expectations of their own reality, and of the literary reality they are just coming to understand, will not serve them in constructing meaning if they do not engage intellectually and reflectively with the text.

The literary depth of fantasy works, as discussed in the paragraphs above, represents the temperate conditions which allow a teacher to plant the seeds of critical literacy skills in the fertile fields of student minds with a reasonable hope that their efforts will bear fruit. Character complexity, thematic depth, personal relevance, stylistic excellence, and a compelling story are necessary elements that comprise high-quality literature. In subsequent pages, I will investigate, through brief analyses, the

extent to which the works of fantasy discussed below contain these important elements. More importantly, I will examine the extent to which the works address some of the key components of critical literacy (see Fig. 1 below) that enable students to acquire the skills of the critically literate reader, thus making them appropriate for use in the classroom to engender critical literacy skills.

Analyses of fantasy works from one of the five key questions of critical literacy (see Fig. 1 on next page) are not unknown. Cherland (2008) addresses issues of feminism in the Harry Potter books, exploring the series through the lens of critical literacy, while Hatcher (2007) takes a similar stance to analyze the role of women in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954, 1955), and Sprague & Risher (2002) share insights into their feminist readings of fantasy literature as a genre. Cox (1990) asserts the value of fantasy and science fiction works in the high school classroom by using critical literacy as a template for student analysis. In a more limited exploration, Prothero (1990) argues for the inclusion of science fiction and fantasy texts in the high school classroom, asserting that ethics can be taught using these genres. In the realm of morality and spirituality, Rosebury (2008) and Radley (2003) analyze *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954, 1955) and the Harry Potter series (Rowling, i.a., 1997), respectively. As this brief list illustrates, fantasy literature has been valued in scholarly analyses through the lens of critical literacy.

Fig. 1: Key Questions of Critical Literacy

- **Dominant cultural discourse:** What social/political forces does the text promote (*i.e.*, what is the dominant cultural discourse), and what are the sources of power? How does the author position (or construct) the reader to accept that perspective? To what extent can the text be used to promote social justice or equitability?
- **Voices:** What voices are represented in (or absent from) the text? Which voices are being heard or validated, and which voices are being silenced or marginalized? Identify the diversity or uniformity of voices represented in the text.
- **Issues and themes:** What are some of the issues or themes in the text, and to what level of complexity are they explored? Are the issues represented one-dimensionally or over-simplified by the author and need to be *problematized*?
- **Disrupting the commonplace:** How can we re-envision the text from an alternate perspective? What are some alternate ways the text can be interpreted to yield multiple (or resistant) readings?
- **Self-reflection/promoting social justice:** How can the text be used as a springboard for self-reflection and self-improvement, to examine issues of domination and subordination, and/or to help promote social justice? What connections can be seen between the text and the self, other texts, or the world that might support those goals?

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe

Arguably C.S. Lewis's best-known work of fiction is *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950), a children's fantasy novel and the first book he wrote for his *The Chronicles of Narnia* series. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* relates the adventures of four children—Lucy, Edmund, Susan, and Peter Pevensie—as they journey into Narnia, a world they access by walking into a clothing wardrobe. Lewis frames the narrative around the escape of the four children from war-torn London during the German bombing of England in World War II. Their entrance into Narnia precipitates a rebellion of the inhabitants of that world against the White Witch, an oppressive figure who has cast herself as the Queen of Narnia and against whom the children lead the armies of the Narnians with the help of Aslan, the Great Lion. Thus, the children are protected from the harsh realities of war in their own world and thrust into positions of leadership and action in the war to liberate Narnia.

The dominant cultural discourse of the text combines a Christian sensibility with a respect for political authority denoted by social class. The concept of political power

through social class is introduced soon after Edmund arrives in Narnia and encounters the White Witch who addresses herself as “the Queen of Narnia” (Lewis, 1950, p. 34). Later, in conversation with the Beavers, the children are first introduced to Aslan as “the King” and “the Lord of the whole wood,” (Lewis, 1950, p. 85) suggesting political power associated with social class. During that same scene, the four children discover a prophecy that suggests they are destined to end the reign of the White Witch and take over the rule of Narnia: “*When Adam’s flesh and Adam’s bone / Sits at Cair Paravel in throne, / The evil time will be over and done*” (Lewis, 1950, p. 87). Later in the text, Aslan shows Peter the castle at Cair Paravel, telling Peter, “ ‘I show it to you because you are the firstborn and you will be High King over all the rest’ ” (Lewis, 1950, p. 142). Eventually, the children defeat the Witch and are crowned Kings and Queens of Narnia by Aslan near the end of the book. The primary source of power then is that of a monarchy, and the Pevensie children are accorded the respect due to monarchs: the other creatures minister to them, defer to them, and accept their leadership unquestioningly. Through his use of the prophecy, the ministrations and deference of the other creatures toward the Pevensies, and the creatures’ unquestioning acceptance of the children’s rulership, Lewis seems to be positioning the reader to accept the children as the rightful rulers of Narnia, rather than suggesting that the role of the children is merely to liberate the land with the ultimate goal of providing a safe place for the creatures of Narnia to self-govern.

The allusions to “Adam” within the prophecy quoted above point to the Christian philosophical origins of the text, a point which reinforces the way in which the children are first identified by the Beavers, the creatures who shared the prophecy with them. When he first addresses the children, Mr. Beaver asks, “ ‘Are you the Sons of Adam and the Daughters of Eve?’ [Mr. Beaver] said” (Lewis, 1950, p. 73). The first question Mr. Tumnus, a faun Lucy meets immediately after entering Narnia and with

whom she develops a close relationship, asks of Lucy is whether she is a “Daughter of Eve” (Lewis, 1950, p. 11). At several other points, the children are addressed as such by both the White Witch and Aslan. Thus, the children are defined by their Christian roots.

Another way the Christian ideology can be seen is through Lewis’s use of allegory. As King (1984) and Thomas (2003) have pointed out, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* illustrates Gluttony, one of the Seven Deadly Sins (Kastenbaum, 2002), through the actions of Edmund, the second-born male of the Pevensie children. In the story, the White Witch offers Turkish Delight to Edmund who, overcome with his desire for the magical candies, tries to answer her questions at first but soon “thought only of trying to shovel down as much Turkish Delight as he could, and the more he ate the more he wanted to eat, and he never asked himself why the [Witch] should be so inquisitive” (Lewis, 1950, p. 38). Edmund’s gluttony becomes the gateway through which the Witch seduces him, causing him to betray his siblings. Edmund’s Judas-like betrayal of his family has obvious Biblical connections (*Bible*, Mark 14: 10-11), though once again Lewis must reconfigure the story to reach his target audience of children who are more likely to be moved by their desire for Turkish Delight candy than for money, the motivating factor of the Biblical Judas. Additional comparisons can be seen later in the novel: Aslan’s walk to the Stone Table and his subsequent murder at the hands of the Witch and her loyal subjects (Lewis, 1950, pp. 163-170) is similar to Jesus’ walk to Golgotha and his crucifixion (*Bible*, Mark 15: 22-25), the breaking of the Stone Table (Lewis, 1950, p. 176) parallels the tearing of the Temple curtain in two (*Bible*, Mark 15: 38), and Aslan’s resurrection and reunion with Susan and Lucy (Lewis, 1950, pp. 177-178) is an obvious re-working of the resurrection of Jesus and his encounter with the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene (*Bible*, Matthew 28: 9-10). The child-readers of the Lewis book are moved emotionally through important Christian episodes

re-invented as events in a story they can understand. Thus, the text reflects a cultural discourse dominated by Christianity and a strong sense of social class from which is derived political power, points which address the first of the key elements of critical literacy.

Critical literacy calls for students to disrupt the commonplace of the text, to re-envision or re-interpret the text in various ways that yield alternate understandings, and this may be accomplished by examining the Christian ethos present throughout the text. C.S. Lewis himself denies writing the Chronicles in order merely to allegorize the tenets of the Christian faith, or to illustrate Biblical scenes with the goal of proselytizing children (Bane, no date; Cowart, no date). His goal, some scholars suggest, was to “open peoples’ hearts to accepting Christ as their Savior” (Cowart, no date; King 1987). While this point may be debatable, it seems reasonable that the books should first be taken as captivating children’s stories and Aslan as a memorable, compelling character before discussing the heavy-handed Christianity of the texts, essentially giving Lewis the benefit of the doubt. For example, it could easily be argued that while the books do portray Christian doctrine clearly, the messages that the books suggest—selflessness, temperance, patience, kindness, humility—are certainly not ill-conceived or harmful, even if blindly ingested by atheist-children. Even so, if the books create a receptivity among children to the Christian faith and enhance a young person’s understanding of complex Christian dogma through their comprehension of the Narnian tales, they also seem to suggest that one’s ultimate spiritual redemption depends in some degree to one’s entrance into Narnia (*i.e.*, acceptance of Christianity) as well as one’s subsequent behavior there, a conception which, at the very least, undercuts alternative religious points of view and, at the worst, alienates those readers of differing religious beliefs by denying the legitimacy of their faith. Validation of one particular religious viewpoint

can suggest an implicit rejection of others which can help inform a critical reading of a text.

Critical literacy entails an awareness of voice, particularly which voices are “heard” in a text and which are “silenced,” and this awareness enables one to perceive the relative value of male and female voices in the text. Specifically, it is the male voices which tend to be validated and elevated, and female voices which tend to be marginalized and deprecated. For example, although Lucy was the original discoverer of the entrance to Narnia, it is her brother Peter who wields the ultimate political power in the novel, becoming High King and leading the Narnian rebels against the White Witch, eventually facing off against her in a sword-fight during the final battle (though it is Aslan who ultimately kills her).

Males are shown to occupy positions of dominance over females in the moral arena as well as the political arena: The primary force of Good in the novel is embodied by Aslan, a male lion, while the primary force of Evil is personified by the (female) White Witch. Furthermore, males are given precedence in physical conflict over females who accept their less important role with the mildest of protestations, as when Father Christmas bestows upon the Pevensie children their Christmas gifts: Peter is given a sword and shield, with the instructions that they are “tools, not toys.” Susan is given a bow and arrows along with the warning to “ ‘use the bow only in great need,’ [Father Christmas] said, ‘for I do not mean you to fight in the battle’ ” (Lewis, 1950, p. 118); she is also given a horn to use when she is in need of assistance. Lucy is given a healing cordial and a small dagger, and she too is warned that “ ‘the dagger is to defend yourself at great need. For you also are not to be in the battle’ ” (Lewis, 1950, p. 119). When Lucy protests that she “ ‘could be brave enough’ ,” Father Christmas clarifies his comments by saying that “ ‘battles are ugly when women fight.’ ” Domestically as well, the males occupy the traditional role of hunter-gatherer with Mr. Beaver and Peter

being sent to catch fish for dinner while Mrs. Beaver, along with Lucy and Susan, stay indoors to prepare dinner and set the table. In these ways, males are elevated and encouraged to act, while women are marginalized or relegated to roles in which they support male action.

One of the predominant concerns of the novel is the struggle between good and evil, symbolized through Aslan and the White Witch, respectively. While the evil represented by the Witch is fairly one-dimensional (despite her duplicity in tricking Edmund into betraying his siblings, a trick the audience can easily perceive even if Edmund cannot), Aslan's portrayal seems slightly more complicated. He is shown to be a powerful creature, yet he is also depicted ambiguously, described as being good yet dangerous, as Mrs. Beaver explains to the children: “ [I]f there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly.’ ‘Then he isn't safe?’ said Lucy. ‘Safe?’ said Mr. Beaver; ‘don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you’ ” (Lewis, 1950, p. 86). This view of Aslan is reinforced when the children first see him: “People who have not been in Narnia sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time. If the children had ever thought so, they were cured of it now [that they had seen Aslan]” (Lewis, 1950, p. 140). Yet, throughout the story, Aslan conveys a sense of wisdom and calm, easing the fears of those around him, especially the children, as shown when Mr. Beaver mentions Aslan to them after dinner, “for once again that strange feeling—like the first signs of spring, like good news, had come over them” (Lewis, 1950, p. 85). These ambiguous feelings seem connected to a system of reward and punishment, for when they first hear Aslan's name, Edmund (who had lied to his siblings, planning to betray them and side with the White Witch) reacts negatively, feeling “a sensation of

mysterious horror” (Lewis, 1950, p. 74), while Peter feels “brave and adventurous” and Susan and Lucy experience similarly positive emotions.

Another key element of critical literacy identified above focuses on intrapersonal issues of self-reflection as well as issues of morality and ethics (Comber, 2001). As can be clearly seen above, the Narnia books obviously deal with issues of morality and ethics, opening up opportunities for conversations about the actions of local and national political and religious figures; the behaviors of peers, siblings, parents, and teachers; the social and political beliefs professed by actors and performers in the media spotlight; and the ethics displayed by professional athletes among many others. The actions of the characters can be discussed from a moral perspective and the student’s own behavior measured against them using questions that address, for example, the ambiguous nature of Aslan’s character, or the extent to which Edmund, a rather young boy who is probably between six and ten years of age, is morally responsible for his treachery against his siblings, or the implications of such a betrayal.

As can be seen through the discussions of the elements of critical literacy present and through the literary complexities apparent, C.S. Lewis’s (1950) *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* not only contains a depth of expression, a profundity that encourages multiple readings and rewards in-depth study, but it also contains elements that enable teachers to help students learn the skills of critical literacy. Such texts are not “mere fluff” to be consumed lightly, indulging our escapist desires, then quickly dismissed as fare for children. The book remains in print since its publication in 1950, though such popularity, scholar Tom Shippey (2002) points out, “does not guarantee literary quality...but it never comes about for no reason. Nor are those reasons always and necessarily feeble or meretricious ones, though there has long been a tendency among the literary and cultural élite to think so” (p. xix). Therefore, in addition to its popularity and complexity, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is appropriate for

teachers to use who wish to engender the skills of critical literacy in students and is therefore worthy of studying in school.

The Hobbit

The next novel for examination is J.R.R. Tolkien's children's fantasy novel, *The Hobbit* (1937). The primary elements that enable the novel to be used in a classroom focused on critical literacy include the book's presentation of middle class values and fears and what they have to teach us about our own world, the absence of female characters in the novel, the complexity and subtlety of Bilbo's interpretation of his role as thief, and the presentation of what can be considered proper and improper—and even heroic—behavior for members of society.

Tolkien's (1937) *The Hobbit* can be examined from a Marxist perspective (Drout, 2006), an important lens through which to view the text since it can illuminate ways the novel attempts to position the reader relative to issues of power, economics, and social class—all important elements of the critical literacy perspective. Bilbo is presented in the text as a wealthy upper middle-class inhabitant of The Shire in the fictional world of Middle-earth: He has no job, yet he lives fairly comfortably. He enjoys the comforts of his home and has plenty of food on hand to offer the dwarves and Gandalf when they arrive unexpectedly. When he leaves for his adventure, he notes with apparent regret that he did not have “a hat, a walking stick or any money” (Tolkien, 1937, p. 30), nor did he have his “pocket-handkerchief,” luxuries befitting a member of the bourgeoisie and necessary to one who was going on an expedition “through hobbit-lands, a wide respectable country inhabited by decent folk, with good roads, [and] an inn or two” (Tolkien, 1937, p. 31). In this way, Tolkien establishes Bilbo's social class and the general sedate manner of hobbits and the civilized climate of Hobbiton and The Shire.

Bilbo's first encounter in the Lone-lands involves trolls, members of a social class far beneath Bilbo and sources of anxiety for him. The trolls he meets—named Bert, Tom, and William (also called “Bill” in the text)—are described as “three very large persons...toasting mutton on long spits of wood, and licking the gravy off their fingers” (Tolkien, 1937, p. 34). Bilbo immediately recognizes them as trolls “in spite of his sheltered life” because of their physical appearance and “their language, which was not drawing-room fashion at all, at all” and he was “very much alarmed, as well as disgusted” by their behavior. Their table manners appall the narrator as well who notes that one of the trolls “took a big bite off a sheep's leg he was roasting, and wiped his lips on his sleeve” before explaining, somewhat apologetically, “Yes, I am afraid trolls do behave like that” (Tolkien, 1937, p. 35). Furthermore, the speech of the trolls is represented in dialect: “‘Blimey, Bert, look what I've copped!’ said William” (Tolkien, 1937, p. 36). Soon after capturing Bilbo, the trolls, who “are slow in the uptake, and mighty suspicious about anything new to them” (Tolkien, 1937, p. 36), get into a fistfight over what to do with poor Bilbo, whom they physically man-handle, picking Bilbo up by his toes and shaking him. Their names, their manners (or lack thereof), their speech, and their general oafishness are clearly intended to identify the trolls as members of the lower class, a group that creates anxieties for poor Bilbo, a solidly upper-middle class person, and the narrative clearly embodies a negative view of the trolls, positioning the reader to view the actions of these “disgusting” creatures disapprovingly.

At the opposite end of the social class spectrum lives Smaug, the evil dragon who displaced the dwarves, stole their treasure, and appropriated their dwelling—the Lonely Mountain. Unlike the stupid, ill-mannered trolls, who represent only a physical threat to Bilbo (and who are so inattentive to him that they drop him when they are distracted by the appearance of one of the dwarves, forgetting about him almost

immediately), Smaug represents multiple threats to Bilbo: physical, intellectual, and economic. He can physically crush or incinerate the hobbit—that much is obvious from the text—but Bilbo’s first encounter with the dragon involves a word-game. After their initial interaction, in which Bilbo pays several compliments to his host, Smaug recognizes Bilbo’s manners, even if he feels above exhibiting the same courtesies to his hobbit-guest: “‘You have nice manners for a thief and a liar,’ said the dragon” (Tolkien, 1937, p. 222). Soon after, Bilbo begins tantalizing Smaug with clever word-puzzles that hint at his identity without revealing it, a tactic of which the narrator highly approves: “This of course is the way to talk to dragons, if you don’t want to reveal your proper name (which is wise), and don’t want to infuriate them by a flat refusal (which is also very wise)” (Tolkien, 1937, p. 223). This sort of speech which is laden with hidden meanings and riddles, speech that is indirect and obliquely suggestive, is reminiscent of the double-speak of the British aristocracy (Drout, 2006).

The balance of the scales of their conversation tips first toward Bilbo who was “pleased with his riddling,” then toward Smaug who insinuates that the dwarves plan to betray Bilbo, causing a “nasty suspicion” to grow on Bilbo’s mind, then back toward Bilbo who finally outsmarts Smaug by tricking him into revealing a weak spot in his armor. Their seemingly-lighthearted conversation hides private uncertainties as well: Smaug is puzzled by Bilbo’s hobbit-scent with which the dragon is unfamiliar, and Bilbo is anxious that he will be seen by Smaug’s piercing eye and in fact nearly falls victim to the dragon-spell when he feels an “unaccountable desire” to reveal himself and expose the dwarves’ plans to Smaug. Finally, Smaug represents an economic threat, not just to Bilbo, but to the entire community that surrounds the mountain: The dragon sits on untold sums of gold and jewels, enjoying the sight and feel of the wealth but not actually spending any of it, to the detriment of the local economy.

This, then, is the threat Smaug truly represents in the text: the anxieties of the middle class that are brought on by the aristocracy. Thus, Bilbo is attacked from above and below, socially and economically speaking. The monsters of the story therefore represent the anxieties of the middle class. While this interpretation may sound far-fetched, Tolkien himself, in his essay “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics” (1936), suggested that the monsters that populate such works as *Beowulf* represent the forces of chaos and embody the fears of the listeners, personifying them in such a way that they become comprehensible and therefore, if not controllable, then at least manageable. Such a reading of the text of *The Hobbit* can lead the reader to understand issues of power and control from an economic standpoint, an important issue of critical literacy, thus suggesting that the book is appropriate for a classroom attempting to engender such skills in students.

An important question that critical literacy asks is, who is marginalized in the text? (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), looking specifically at issues of gender disparity. This issue is particularly germane to *The Hobbit*, since females are not just marginalized, they are entirely absent. No females exist in the text whatsoever, not even female monsters. This aspect of the book is important to point out to students who may not even realize the absence of females, let alone speculate upon the significance of the fact. Students may want to consider this in relation to the tendency of fairy tales (after all, in Tolkien’s mind, he was a writer of “fairy-stories”) to employ the motif of the “damsel in distress” frequently being rescued by the knight in shining armor, a motif satirized by Robert Munsch (1980) in his children’s book, *The Paper Bag Princess*, in which the princess rescues the prince but refuses to marry him in the end. Females often seem to be marginalized in fairy tales, and students should be aware of how the author might be positioning them (consciously or unconsciously) to accept females in the role of object instead of participant. Was Tolkien trying to say that only males can

be heroic or exist in the heroic realm? Such a presumption may be ill-advised, but a critical reader must be aware of such possibilities.

Despite his relatively bourgeois position in society, Bilbo is hired as the thief and attempts to fulfill this role, with varying degrees of success. His first attempt—picking the pocket of a troll—does not succeed in part because of Bilbo’s inexperience (he neglects to consider the mischievousness of the troll’s purse), and he and his friends are nearly killed due to his incompetence. Bilbo’s reasons for making the attempt are worth a brief look, though. Although he considers the possibility of sticking each troll with a dagger, he quickly dismisses this idea—not because it is distasteful or unfair, but because such a thief as might do this, he reasons, has “less professional pride.” It is pride that causes him to make any attempt to filch something—“he could not go straight back to Thorin and Company emptyhanded” (Tolkien, 1937, pp. 35-36), and it is expedience that makes him attempt pickpocketing—it seemed the easiest. The morality of theft does not deter Mr. Baggins when dealing with trolls, and his professional pride overrides any precautions for his own safety and the safety of his friends. The text seems to suggest then that stealing is okay as long as it involves stealing from “bad” people who “deserve¹⁹” it.

In a contrasting event, when the dwarves are imprisoned in the halls of the Elvenking, Bilbo must filch food and drink from the tables of the Elvenking or he would probably die. Although the elves are shown as being unfair since they imprisoned the dwarves and threatened to keep them indefinitely, it must be noted that 1) Thorin and Company were caught trespassing on the lands of the Elvenking, and 2) in the world of Tolkien’s Middle-earth, relations between elves and dwarves are strained in the best of times due to a long-standing racial enmity. Thus, the actions of the Elvenking are mitigated by these two circumstances. Bilbo obviously regrets the necessity of his

¹⁹ The trolls mention that they have already killed and eaten many people and have stolen the mutton they are currently enjoying.

actions, since at the end of the novel, he gives the Elvenking a “necklace of silver and pearls” as recompense for the provender to which he helped himself. In this case, the text suggests that even stealing to save one’s life is wrong if one steals from “good” people who don’t “deserve²⁰” it.

This leads to another important question to be raised by critically literate readers: What does the author want us to think about the behaviors of the characters in the novel? What do the ‘good’ characters do that make them ‘good’? What do the ‘bad’ do to make them ‘bad’? (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), and how can the text be used as a tool for self-reflection? A brief analysis of Bilbo’s²¹ actions can be rewarding. Although his actions are generally ‘good,’ some of his behaviors can be seen in a more ambiguous light.

- He is polite to Gandalf (he invites the wizard to tea) and the dwarves (he invites them into his home as well and serves them, even though he does not know them). Significantly, the text suggests however that part of Bilbo’s motivation to invite Gandalf to tea was simply to get rid of him, since he did not really expect the wizard to accept the invitation. His politeness then seems to derive in part from selfish motives;
- He has pity on the weak (he refrains from killing Gollum who is unarmed and visible [unlike Bilbo] and has a miserable existence [also unlike Bilbo]);
- He does his best to help his friends (he rescues them from giant spiders and suspicious elves, and he even decides to return to the dark tunnels of the Misty Mountains from which he had only just escaped because he thought his friends were still trapped there);
- He lives up to his end of the bargain he had made with the dwarves (even though Smaug tempts him to betray them);

²⁰ The elves have not stolen the food Bilbo partakes, and seem honorable, if rather stiff-necked.

²¹ I am presuming Bilbo’s character to represent the ‘good’, since he is the protagonist of the novel and is obviously not portrayed ironically by Tolkien as an anti-hero.

- He steals from his friends (he finds and keeps Thorin's Arkenstone jewel, even though he knew that Thorin valued it above all other treasures) and gave the Arkenstone to a rival faction to help their negotiations with the dwarves (although he does so to prevent war and Gandalf highly approves his actions), thus revealing an almost Machiavellian morality: stealing and duplicity are okay if one performs them for the right reasons;
 - He refrains from direct combat during the Battle of Five Armies, putting on his ring to become invisible and staying out of combat rather than risking his life to help his friends win a dangerous—but crucially important—battle, thus opening himself up to accusations of cowardice;
 - He is generous (he offers to let Gandalf keep the entire treasure recovered from the trolls); and
 - He is humble (when Gandalf observes that Bilbo is “ ‘only quite a little fellow in a wide world’ ”, Bilbo replies, “ ‘Thank goodness!’ ” [Tolkien, 1937, p. 305]).
- On the other hand, the “bad” characters—trolls, goblins, Gollum, wargs, and giant spiders—engage in less ambiguous actions that define their natures in generally one-dimensional ways:
- They actively try to harm others (the trolls debate whether to roast, squash, or mince and boil the dwarves; the goblins kidnap the dwarves; Gollum threatens to kill Bilbo; the wargs chase the dwarves into trees and snap at them; and the spiders poison the dwarves, tie them up, and prepare to eat them);
 - They are suspicious (the Great Goblin calls the dwarves spies, thieves, and murderers);
 - They are ill-mannered and foul-mouthed (the trolls wipe their fingers on their pants and their lips on their sleeves, they lick gravy off their fingers, they drink

right from jugs, and their language “was not drawing-room fashion at all, at all” [Tolkien, 1937, p. 34]); and

- They are sneaky and treacherous (Gollum planned to turn invisible with his ring and strangle Bilbo).

In this way, readers examining the text critically can gain insight into the expectations of the author for proper (and improper) behavior. That these behaviors are one-dimensional and sometimes innocuous (*e.g.*, poor manners) is beside the point: *The Hobbit* is a children’s book, and the audience may not understand complex character motivations, subtly ambiguous actions, or particularly violent episodes. The actions of characters are generally “bad” or “good” as most children can understand them²². *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954, 1955), an adult fantasy novel, develops a more subtle, more complex vision of the good/evil dichotomy and incorporates some much darker imagery. (At one point in *The Return of the King* [Tolkien, 1955], the orc army of the Dark Lord attempts to demoralize the inhabitants of the city of Minas Tirith by catapulting the severed, branded heads of their fellow warriors into the city.) Despite the simplicity of the characters’ actions, *The Hobbit* contains character lessons that are clear and comprehensible for children. Once uncovered, readers can discuss whether such behaviors are truly valued in society and whether they possess them—or should. In short, readers can decide whether their own moral character would be improved by adopting or rejecting such attributes. Thus, the text becomes a valuable springboard for discussions of morality and good (and bad) behaviors, helping students reflect on themselves and their own behaviors more critically and hopefully leading to self-improvement.

²² This is not necessarily true of Bilbo’s actions at the end of the novel in which he “steals” the Arkenstone of Thrain and gives it to the opposing side in a negotiation, thereby betraying his friends. That he does this for a nobler purpose—to achieve peace between two reasonable adversaries—may escape all but the most savvy child; thus, most young readers are apt to be confused by Bilbo’s “bad” actions because they cannot understand his complex reasoning.

Therefore, one can suggest that because it addresses several key questions of critical literacy—employing an identifiable dominant cultural class-based discourse from which the text is written, validating and silencing male and female voices respectively, exploring complex issues of morality, enabling multiple perspectives and resistant readings, and providing a springboard for conversations around self-improvement—Tolkien’s (1937) *The Hobbit* may be beneficially employed in the classroom by teachers attempting to instill the tenets of critical literacy in their students. The next text to be examined, Tolkien’s (1954, 1955) novel *The Lord of the Rings*, represents adult fantasy literature in the high school classroom.

The Lord of the Rings

The in-depth analysis of Tolkien’s children’s book *The Hobbit* suggests that the text is sufficiently multi-dimensional to warrant its inclusion in a classroom designed to engender critical literacy skills in students. Tolkien’s major adult fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings*²³, contains at least as much depth and is arguably a more literarily significant work of literature than its predecessor. The analysis below explores to what extent it too can be used to engender critical literacy skill successfully.

The dominant themes of *The Lord of the Rings* include the good-evil dichotomy and Tolkien’s interpretation of the nature of evil, the interplay of fate and free will, an individual’s personal responsibility to the world, hope in the face of hopelessness (a manifestation of the Viking theory of Northern Courage [Drout 2006]), and the encroachment of industrialization upon the natural world. Although each of these themes can be developed and used as a basis to teach students the tenets of critical

²³ Although *The Lord of the Rings* was intended to be published as a single volume (Shippey, 2002; Drout, 2006), I will separate my discussions of the three texts that comprise it, focusing on *The Fellowship of the Ring* since it is the first section of the novel and the part most likely to be used (if any part of the novel is taught in school). When I make reference to the novels, I will reference them using Roman numerals according to their publication order: *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Tolkien, 1954), *The Two Towers* (Tolkien, 1954), and *The Return of the King* (Tolkien, 1955). Thus, a reference to page 294 of *The Return of the King* will be referenced as (III, 294).

literacy, this discussion will be limited to only one: personal responsibility. Because the novel's primary protagonist—Frodo Baggins the hobbit—is intended as an Everyman (Drout 2006) and his quest illustrates the impact one small person can have on the entire world, students should have little difficulty connecting their own lives to this theme and understanding its significance.

The concept of individual responsibility begins in chapter two of *The Fellowship of the Ring*: “The Shadow of the Past”. In this chapter, Frodo receives an inheritance from his cousin (and legal guardian) Bilbo—a plain gold Ring, a Ring Frodo soon finds out has magical properties and is sought after by Sauron, the Dark Lord, whose power is once again growing in the world and whose rise Frodo laments: “ ‘I wish [Sauron’s rise] need not have happened in my time,’ said Frodo. ‘So do I,’ said Gandalf, ‘and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.’ ” (I, 55-56). In this way, Tolkien introduces the concept of personal responsibility. Sometimes, we have no choice about the circumstances of our lives or the times in which we live, but we always have choices over our actions and how we deal with the situations in which we find ourselves. Frodo was given the Ring and now he must accept responsibility for it, despite his wish that Bilbo “ ‘had not found it, and that [Frodo] had not got it!’ ” (I, 66). Reluctantly, Frodo agrees to keep the Ring and guard it—at least temporarily.

Eventually, Frodo, aided by his friends Sam, Merry, and Pippin and by the mysterious stranger Strider, makes his way to Rivendell, the home of Elrond Halfelven, where a Council is held to determine what is to be done with the Ring. At the Council, the history of the Ring is discussed and it is decided that someone must volunteer to take the Ring to the evil land of Mordor and cast it into the fire of Mount Doom, an almost-hopeless task. In spite of an “overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace by Bilbo’s side in Rivendell,” (I, 303), Frodo offers to take the Ring himself, “though

[he does] not know the way” (I, 303). His choice is approved by Elrond, and he is appointed eight companions on his journey.

Frodo’s great reluctance to take responsibility for the evil Ring is understandable, given that Gandalf has already painted a bleak picture of the Ring’s previous owners and warns Frodo that “sooner or later the dark power will devour” (I, 51) the mortal who possesses the Ring. Despite his reluctance, despite the dangers of possessing the Ring, despite the apparent hopelessness of the task the Council had set before him, Frodo still agrees to accept responsibility for the destruction of the Ring—a heroic offer. Given the odds against him and his own great desire to let others attempt the difficult tasks, Frodo chooses his own fate. In this way, Tolkien positions the reader to view Frodo’s actions as heroic and worthy of emulation, for the reader may someday be placed in a situation similar to Frodo, and if we do not choose to act, how can we expect others to act on our behalf?

As in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, females occupy a marginal position in *The Lord of the Rings*, though they are present in the text. Males continue to dominate the novel, occupying positions of action and authority, while women are generally absent or passive. Apart from a few hobbit-women, only six named female characters exist in the novel: Ioreth, an old wife who assists in the Houses of Healing; Arwen, daughter of Elrond; Éowyn, niece of King Théoden; Goldberry, the domestic partner of Tom Bombadil; Galadriel, wife of Celeborn and elf-queen of Lothlórien; and Shelob, a giant spider that attacks Frodo and Sam (II, 373).

Ioreth occupies a small but important role in the novel, appearing only twice in *The Return of the King*, where she reminds Gandalf, through a proverb, of the healing powers possessed by the true king of Gondor (*i.e.*, Aragorn) (III, 138) and later to brag to her kinswoman that it was she who was partly responsible for the recovery of the Lord Faramir (III, 264) due to her timely recollection of the proverb. In this way,

Tolkien seems to suggest that women, represented by Ioreth's remembered adage, are the keepers of domestic wisdom. However, they are also prattlers and bores, if Ioreth's personality is any guide.

Arwen appears in *The Fellowship* in Rivendell (I, 254), but she does not speak and is most noted for her great beauty. The first time her voice is heard is in *The Return of the King* (III, 272) when she addresses Frodo, sending him back home to the Shire with a gift. Although she is wife to Aragorn, granddaughter of Galadriel, daughter of Elrond, and Queen of the West, Arwen acts as little more than ornamentation for Aragorn. She does not offer advice, nor take an active role in any of the adventures, nor does she initiate any actions herself. Are women, then, to be seen and not heard, to be noted for their beauty and not for significant contributions to society?

Perhaps, yet such an interpretation is belied by the appearance of Éowyn, a shieldmaiden of Rohan and niece to the king. Despite the role given to her by the king—as caretaker of the people of Rohan while the king and his men are away fighting—she yearns to be in battle, and the description of her in the text reflects this dichotomy: “Slender and tall she was in her white robe girt with silver; but strong she seemed and stern as steel, a daughter of kings” (II, 127). Although the culture of Rohan seems to demand that she tend the home, removed from battle, her desire is to “ride and wield blade” (III, 47) and win renown in battle. Against the command of King Théoden, she disguises herself and joins the campaign to ride to the aid of Gondor where she participates in the battle, eventually stabbing and killing the Lord of the Nazgûl (III, 116), a feat it was foretold that no man could accomplish (III, 114). Through Éowyn, Tolkien seems to suggest that women can be as valuable as men, that they can have the same yearnings for battle and the same courage in the face of death, that they too deserve an opportunity to fight for their beliefs—and that they can even succeed where men might fail.

Little needs to be said of Goldberry, for though she occupies a more prominent place in the text than Arwen, she is still all but insignificant. It is her husband Tom Bombadil who rescues the hobbits from Old Man Willow (I, 135), not she. Her role seemingly is to keep the house, and Tom brings her water lilies and a pretty brooch rescued from a wight's barrow (I, 165): adornments for her, while for the hobbits he chooses magical daggers for self-defense. She, like Arwen, is noted primarily for her appearance instead of more substantial qualities, like courage, strength, wisdom, and intelligence.

Shelob, the only evil female character in the novel, is depicted as a greedy, slavering giant spider, feeding on orcs and other such creatures as she can trap. She does not exist beyond her appetite, except for her reproductive abilities (she bore the giant spiders of Mirkwood [II, 376] which attack and subdue the dwarves in *The Hobbit* [Tolkien, 1937]) which are noted in the text. She is a one-dimensional monster, a threat to Frodo's quest, and little more than that.

Finally, Galadriel, Queen of the elves of Lothlórien, is depicted for her wisdom and strength of character. Although her husband Celeborn initially occupies a more prominent role—he greets Frodo and the others (I, 398)—Galadriel quickly emerges as the more significant character. It is she who tests the resolve of the Companions (I, 401), she who offers to let Frodo and Sam look into her Mirror (I, 406), she who wields Nenya, the Ring of Adamant (I, 409), and she who provides gifts to each member of the Company (I, 421-3), aptly-bestowed gifts that they each find particularly helpful in the future. Thus, in Tolkien's women, the reader sees domesticity, beauty, courage, danger, and wisdom. However, despite the myriad faces they illustrate, females still represent a small fraction of the characters in the novel. Of them only one—Éowyn—is active and adventurous, and even she must disguise herself and disobey her king in order to act.

An important issue explored in the text is Tolkien's development of the process and effects of addiction as illustrated through the Ring of Sauron. At first, the Ring offers some semblance of protection for Bilbo, helping him to escape Gollum in the tunnels beneath the Misty Mountains in *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 1937) among other adventures. In *The Fellowship*, however, the Ring seems to have gotten such a hold over Bilbo that he is almost obsessed with it. He confides in Gandalf that the Ring "has been so growing on my mind lately. Sometimes I have felt like it was like an eye looking at me. And I am always wanting to put it on and disappear, don't you know; or wondering if it is safe, and pulling it out to make sure. I tried locking it up, but I found I couldn't rest without it in my pocket. I don't know why" (I, 36). Bilbo's feelings toward the Ring, along with the comments Gandalf makes to Frodo as he describes the history of the Ring (I, 53), suggest that the longer one possesses the Ring, and the more one uses it, the greater the hold the Ring has on one's mind. This cumulative desire to possess and use the Ring reflects the addictive quality of drugs and alcohol in our society today (Shippey, 2002). It takes great strength of character, Tolkien implies, to release oneself from the hold of such an addictive force, but when one finally does, one can, like Bilbo, feel "better at once" (I, 53) for having done it.

Readers who attempt to re-envision the text from an alternate perspective may choose to focus on the Ring, the catalyzing force behind the novel. Frodo, serving as Tolkien's Everyman, volunteers to take the Ring to Mount Doom and cast it into the fire, thus destroying it. As a representative of the common man, Frodo helps Tolkien convey the notion that even the most humble of people can act in ways that change the world. Tolkien's choice also helps him to re-cast the typical (*i.e.*, epic) role of hero from that of ultra-confident warrior (*e.g.*, Beowulf, Achilles, Odysseus) of great ability and greater renown to that of a physically diminutive, un-warlike (yet courageous), bourgeois member of the landed gentry, a character-type identified by Shippey (2002)

as “low mimetic,” a character on a level with humans in abilities, though not necessarily in social class, that can help mediate a fantasy text because the reader can closely identify with them. But what if the Ring-Bearer were one of the more typically-heroic characters, such as Gandalf or Aragorn? Gandalf the Istari²⁴-wizard, according to Shippey, can be categorized as a character of “myth,” a character superior in kind both to other men and to the environment of other men and who operate on a different plane of existence—not exactly a divine being but close to it. Shippey classifies Aragorn as a character of “romance,” a character superior in degree both to other men and to the environment of other men who are similar to normal humans but who have supernatural characteristics. For example, Aragorn died at 190 years of age at a time of his choosing (III, 277), a gift of longevity bequeathed him by the Valinor, thus exhibiting one of his supernatural characteristics.

Tolkien refutes the argument that Gandalf should be Ring-Bearer by noting the excessive power the Ring would confer to him and suggesting that his own corruption at the hands of the Ring would be inevitable. Gandalf himself refuses the Ring when it is offered by Frodo, saying, “ ‘With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly...I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength’ ” (I, 67-8). But what of Aragorn? How might the story change if he were Ring-Bearer?

Although Aragorn is certainly a character of primary importance in the novel, Frodo remains the protagonist throughout most of the text. If Aragorn were Ring-Bearer, the focus of the narrative would obviously switch to that of Aragorn as the reader followed his journey to the fires of Mount Doom instead of the battle plain of the Pelennor Fields of Gondor. Since the primary concern of Aragorn is to regain his

²⁴ There were five Istari, semi-divine beings dispatched in the Second Age of Middle-earth by the Valinor (Tolkien’s imagined race of gods) to oppose Sauron, of which only three are named: Gandalf, Saruman, and Radagast.

kingdom by liberating Gondor from the yoke of Mordor, thereby proving himself worthy to earn the hand of Arwen in marriage, his interests lie in protecting Gondor's principal city of Minas Tirith, and the Dark Lord's attacks on that city would serve more as a distraction to Aragorn's more important journey with the Ring into the shadowy land of Mordor. Whether he possessed the strength to use the Ring is uncertain, but given the addictive power of the Ring, if Aragorn possessed it, he would likely be focused more on refusing to use the item than on achieving his goals. The novel, therefore, would be about inaction (*i.e.*, not using the Ring) rather than about action (*i.e.*, saving Gondor and its peoples). Despite the fact that Frodo is sometimes tempted to put the Ring on to become invisible, he is apparently not tempted to use the full power of the Ring (he knows he is too weak). Therefore, his focus is on making the journey to destroy the Ring (*i.e.*, action) while Aragorn must help Frodo by defending Gondor against Sauron's armies (*i.e.*, action).

At the end of the novel, the forces of Good defeat the forces of Evil, and peace reigns. This is the ending the text positions the reader to accept, as opposed to wishing for Sauron to emerge victorious or for some other, unforeseen force to take possession of the Ring and enslave the peoples of Middle-earth. But what is the result of the victory of Good? A monarchy is re-established, and free peoples such as the hobbits, must once again come under the dominion of a centralized government which, although it declares the land of the Shire sacrosanct, does not relinquish all control over it. An alternate reading could view the text as promoting a strong, centralized government fashioned as a monarchy at best, or an oppressive, medieval autocracy at worst. While Aragorn may remain true to his promise to hold the borders of the Shire as inviolable (even to himself), the same may not be true of his son, or of his son's son. In re-establishing himself as King of the West, Aragorn may unwittingly have created a line of despot-kings. It could even be argued that the goal of the Ring-Quest was simply to

trade one overlord (*i.e.*, Sauron) for another (*i.e.*, Aragorn). Therefore, even in a novel in which Good ultimately triumphs over Evil, a taint can still be found through a resistant reading.

As a final point, *The Lord of the Rings* raises some interesting questions that may help students reflect on themselves and their behaviors. The power of the Ring tempts Gandalf (I, 67), Boromir (I, 448), and even Sam (III, 185-6), and it is not impossible that the reader may be similarly tempted, if not by an item that bestows incredible power, then by an item that, through its use, creates an ever-increasing desire for yet more: cocaine, alcohol, gambling, or many other such addictive temptations readers may find themselves struggling to resist on a daily basis. The novel may help such readers find the strength to resist by striving to maintain one's personal integrity (as Gandalf does), by enduring the punishment that may befall one who does succumb to temptation (as Boromir does), or simply by embracing one's sense of humility (as Sam does).

Because *The Lord of the Rings* can be shown to embrace a dominant cultural discourse, to absent voices from the text, to develop the significant theme of addiction, to enable a reader to re-envision the text from a different perspective and reinterpret the ending of the novel, and to provide a jumping-off point for readers to self-reflect, the novel seems to support the tenets of critical literacy and may be used to engender those skills in students. The following analysis will explore to what extent the next novel, Ursula Le Guin's (1968) *A Wizard of Earthsea*, may be interpreted in ways that encourage critical literacy.

A Wizard of Earthsea

Ursula K. Le Guin is the author of numerous short stories, poems, and novels, including the Earthsea cycle of fantasy novels. Although her first book in that series, *A*

Wizard of Earthsea (Le Guin, 1968), is more suitable for an adolescent audience, readers may appreciate the delicate poeticism of Le Guin's novel when compared to such dense prose as offered by Tolkien (1954, 1955) in *The Lord of the Rings*. Le Guin's novel is set in the archipelago of Earthsea, a world where magic is embodied in language. In Earthsea, the relationship between the word—spoken in the Old Speech—and the thing (*i.e.*, the referent) is not arbitrary. In the Old Speech (or “True Speech”) of Earthsea, the word *is* the thing it represents, and to wizards the word conveys a power over the referent—Comoletti and Drout (2001) call it “a language of creation.” For example, if a wizard knew the Old Speech word for apple, he²⁵ could make an apple appear. Knowing the name of a sea or a harbor would allow him to control that sea or harbor. The Master Hand, one of the mage-teachers of Ged, the book's protagonist, explains the theory:

“This is a rock; *tolk* in the True Speech,” he said, looking mildly up at Ged now. “A bit of the stone of which Roke Island is made, a little bit of the dry land on which men live. It is itself. It is part of the world. By the Illusion-Change you can make it look like a diamond...But that is mere seeming. Illusion fools the beholder's senses; it makes him see and hear and feel that the thing has changed. But it does not change the thing. To change this rock into a jewel, you must change its true name. And to do that, my son, even to so small a scrap of the world, is to change the world.” (Le Guin, 1968, pp. 43-44)

While the concept that the word *is* the thing might sound completely foreign, utterly fantastical, or even ridiculous, shadows of this idea are numerous in our own language today through onomatopoeic language: the word *buzz* creates a buzz, *pop* creates a popping sound, *boom* makes a booming sound, and the word *borborygmi* describes the rumbling, gurgling sound in one's stomach. In a literal sense, these words *are* the concepts they denote, just as the Old Speech words of Earthsea literally *are* the concepts they denote.

²⁵ I use the male pronoun not from an antiquated belief in its gender neutrality or from an inherent sexism on my part, but because all the wizards—excluding a few witches here and there—of Earthsea are male, an odd and perhaps regrettable choice by a feminist writer like Le Guin.

The concept of magic and how it functions in Earthsea is important to discuss with regard to a critically literate approach to the novel because the dominant voice is male, and their power is located firmly in language, in the Old Speech. In this novel, women's voices are marginalized and even denigrated, while the voices of their male counterparts are validated through their roles as wizards: "There is a saying on [the Island of] Gont, *Weak as woman's magic*, and there is another saying, *Wicked as woman's magic*" (Le Guin, 1968, p. 5). A few women do exist in the novel, but most are portrayed negatively. Ged's aunt, an unnamed witch who teaches him his first spells, is described as "an ignorant woman among ignorant folk" (Le Guin, 1968, p. 5), and one of her first actions is an attempt to trick young Ged, binding him to her service, but his inherent power enables him to thwart her attempt. In Ged's aunt, the reader sees treachery and deceit: a deception born of selfishness.

Serret, a young girl Ged meets while he apprentices with Ogion, a reticent mage of great power, teases him and flirts with him, trying to trick him into revealing some of his magic to her so she could pass it on to her mother who was an enchantress. It is through her influence that Ged inadvertently opens a portal to a different dimension, enabling a shadow to enter Ged's world. Ogion quickly dispels the shadow, but Ged's actions haunt him for years and eventually he makes the same mistake while deep in his studies on Roke Island at the school for wizards.

Ged meets Serret again, much later in the novel, encountering her at the Court of the Terrenon on the island of Osskil where she serves a lord who himself holds some degree of magical power. Again, she tries to trick Ged, this time trying to convince him to touch a mysterious and powerful stone by promising him great power and suggesting that she would even marry him if he agrees. Although he nearly succumbs, Ged sees through her deception and resists her temptations, barely escaping the island with his life. Serret represents a *femme fatale* character, charming the hero with her wiles, but

planning his demise in the shadows. She twice attempts to lead Ged astray: Luck saves him the first time; his humility the second. In *Serret*, the reader sees sexual temptations, temptations which leads toward ruin.

Few other women of note exist in the novel: Princess Elfarran, a spirit of the dead whom Ged tries to summon; the Lady of O, a woman of great beauty who visits the young wizards on the island of Roke, and whose only purpose in the text, it seems, is to inadvertently instigate a conflict between Ged and his rival Jasper, a young wizard slightly older than Ged; and Yarrow, the young sister of Ged's friend Vetch who seems taken with the strange and powerful Ged. While these females fulfill stock roles in the text and are only minimally developed as characters, the additional books in the five-book series contain female characters who are developed more completely, and in the latter *Earthsea* books, Le Guin seems to have re-envisioned the role of women in *Earthsea* society (Rawls, 2008). Furthermore, Selinger (1988) sees the female as, in some ways, embodying the central conflict of the novel: Some of the females in the story—*Serret*, the female dragon Ged confronts, and the Lady of O—represent temptations to Ged that attempt to lead him astray or, in the case of the Lady, instigate conflict between Ged and another male (Jasper) due to her womanly appeal, exciting in Ged a desire to compete for her favor.

The concept of power—its attainment, its use, the responsibilities governing its manipulation—pervades the text. Le Guin explores the issue of power and responsibility through depicting Ged's decisions—for better or worse—which can lead readers to a discussion of the responsibilities borne by a wizard who has control over the physical nature of his world and, by extension, the use of power by the non-magical inhabitants of our world. As the use of magic is defined in the text, Le Guin seems to be suggesting that those in power (*i.e.*, wizards) have an obligation to avoid excess and abuse. She provides both the warnings and directives to guide the behavior of wizards,

and Ged's disobedience to these instructions—due to his hubris—provides the basis for the main conflict in the novel, a conflict, suggests Cummins (1990), embodied by the shadow Ged creates which “symbolizes Ged's unrecognized pride, desire for power and control, and fear of his own death” (p. 35). The foundation for the guidelines by which a wizard must live his life is defined by opposing forces in the world which must be balanced; in this case, Ged and his shadow represent the essential dichotomy.

Ged's first warning against the untutored use of his power occurred near the beginning of *A Wizard of Earthsea* after Ged thwarted a group of raiders who had attacked the village. The protective mist Ged draped over the village drained his power, and Ged was rendered “speechless and stupid like one stunned....His aunt [the witch] said, ‘He has overspent his power,’ but she had no art to help him.” (Le Guin, 1968, p. 13). Another example of the possible negative consequences of using magical powers occurs soon after. Ged's first master, Ogion, admonishes Ged for taking his magical powers lightly and using them for personal aggrandizement: “‘Have you never thought of how danger must surround power as shadow does light? This sorcery is not a game we play for pleasure or for praise. Think of this: that every word, every act of our Art is said and done either for good, or for evil. Before you speak or do you must know the price that is to pay!’” (Le Guin, 1968, p. 23). Despite Ogion's rebuke, Ged does not understand the wizard's role, viewing his magic as a means to power, not for any higher purpose, even after he is warned by the Master Hand: “‘You must not change one thing, one pebble, one grain of sand, until you know what good and what evil will follow on that act. The world is in balance, in Equilibrium.’” (Le Guin, 1968, p. 44).

Despite these experiences, Ged is taunted by a fellow schoolmate and is overcome by his pride, boastfully using his power to raise a spirit from the world of the dead, a near-fatal (for Ged) act that leads to the release into the world of a shadow-creature which hunts Ged for much of the remainder of the book until he assumes

responsibility for his actions and turns the tables on the shadow. Ged's hubris, suggests Cummins (1990), overcomes his self-restraint and causes him to ignore the balance between light and darkness, thus creating the shadow. Because of its focus on Ged's pride, *A Wizard of Earthsea* can be an effective tool to encourage character development in students. Ged eventually overcomes his major character flaw (*i.e.*, hubris) and attempts to rectify his error by taking responsibility for his actions. Once he decides to stop running from his past, Ged is able to deal with the shadow he unleashed, a powerful lesson on appropriate character development.

Unfortunately, Ged must endure a terrible experience before the lessons of his masters are finally able to sink in and he is sufficiently humbled by his sins. Perhaps too much so, for following his recovery, Ged's confidence in his own power, especially his ability to control that power, is shaken by his experiences and he withdraws into himself. Whereas before his mistake he revels in his power, afterward he almost abjures it, preferring not to use his magic unless absolutely necessary, and even then he does so reluctantly. It is not until Ged becomes comfortable with his wizardly role—until he achieves *balance*—that Ged can confront the shadow, a creature he controls by calling the thing by its name:

Aloud and clearly, breaking the old silence, Ged spoke the shadow's name and in the same moment the shadow spoke without lips or tongue, saying the same word: "Ged." And the two voices were one voice.

Ged reached out his hands, dropping his staff, and took hold of his shadow, of the black self that reached out to him. Light and darkness met, and joined, and were one. (Le Guin, 1968, p. 179)

In this way, he achieves mastery of the shadow through language, through the act of naming, making himself complete and whole, uniting his corporeal self with his shadow-image, the light and the dark, in the midst of an ocean beyond Ged's known world.

The concept of balance is a critical element in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. The wizards of Earthsea, as noted above, strive to act in harmony with the world, working to maintain a balance between good and evil that is almost Buddhist in its structure²⁶. In fact, when Ged loses this balance, when he sunders himself and releases the shadow, he becomes incomplete, even “evil” as the text seems to suggest when Ged is unable to sail to Roke Island because of a storm that had arisen, an unusual circumstance that Ged discusses with the captain of the vessel:

‘It is not against your ship this wind blows, but against me.’
 ‘Against you, a wizard of Roke?’
 ‘Have you never heard of the Roke-wind, master?’
 ‘Aye, that keeps off evil powers from the Isle of the Wise, but
 what has that to do with you, a Dragontamer?’
 ‘That is between me and my shadow,’ Ged answered shortly. (Le
 Guin, 1968, p. 97)

While Le Guin refrains from defining good and evil in the text, she does seem to suggest through Ged’s experiences at sea and his reunion with his shadow at the conclusion of the book that good and evil define each other, even contain each other, much like the Chinese symbol of the *yin-yang*, and that the absence of good (*i.e.*, the loss of balance) creates evil. This circular reasoning will not take us far, however. In fact, the concepts of *good* and *evil* are not as well defined in *A Wizard of Earthsea* as they are in, for example, C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, which embodies Christian-Biblical definitions of good and evil, or J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, which seems to define evil as a desire for domination and good as a “live and let live” philosophy. A closer look at the above excerpt describing Ged’s inability to travel to Roke due to the Roke-wind which “keeps off evil powers from the Isle of the Wise” will help to clarify Le Guin’s interpretation of the good-evil dichotomy.

Ged’s conflict, as has been discussed, involves his attempts to eliminate the threat of the “shadow” that hunts him, thus restoring balance to his life. Because Ged

²⁶ While Le Guin maintained that her Earthsea wizards were based on a Buddhist monk model, Comoletti and Drout (2001) have suggested that they bear a much closer resemblance to medieval Christian priests.

released a shadow from the land of the dead, he upset the balance. One can picture a see-saw perfectly balanced upon a moral fulcrum. Ged, in releasing the shadow, caused the weight of his moral see-saw to shift from one side to the other (*i.e.*, dark to light²⁷), causing imbalance. Because of the reaction of the Roke-wind, Ged himself *is* evil, even though his actions are generally good: He had just saved the town of Low Torning from a dragon threat at great personal risk (and some measure of self-sacrifice), and he left the town so as not to draw upon them the threat of the shadow, even though the villagers “would have kept him gladly the rest of his life to praise and boast of” (Le Guin, 1968, p. 95). This imbalance, then, becomes the beginning of a definition of good and evil. In the words of the Master Hand, “a wizard’s power...must follow knowledge, and serve need. To light a candle is to cast a shadow....” (Le Guin, 1968, p. 44). Ged’s release of the shadow contradicts this statement: Ged cast a shadow, but lit no candle; thus, he committed an abomination, upsetting the natural order of the world—a supremely evil act in terms of the book.

This discussion of Le Guin’s novel *A Wizard of Earthsea* suggests ways the novel can encourage a critically literate perspective in readers: The dominant cultural discourse is embodied in Le Guin’s conception of balance as the driving force behind an individual’s morality, a litmus test of whether one’s actions disrupt the world or are aligned with it; the marginalization of women and the temptations they seem to bring in the text provide opportunities for discussion and analysis; language and its foundations in the power structure of Earthsea help develop important issues on the value of learning and the role of education in society; and the impact of hubris on one’s actions as well as the responsibility one bears toward the world, especially if one also holds great power, can enable readers to reflect on their own actions and examine their own beliefs—all of which suggest that *A Wizard of Earthsea* is an appropriate tool for teachers to use to

²⁷ The shadow, by definition a creature of darkness, left the land of the dead (described in the text as a “dark slope,” “dark hillside,” “kingdom of the darkness,” “lightless cities of the dead,” and a “dim place” [Le Guin, 1968, 80-81]) and entered the land of the living

foster critical literacy in students. The final discussion will focus on a popular fantasy novel from recent years: J.K. Rowling's (1997) *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

The questionable literary value of J.K. Rowling's (1997) novel *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* poses some challenges for teachers trying to engender the skills of critical literacy in students; after all, Harold Bloom denounced the novel in the *Wall Street Journal* (Bloom, 2000), calling it "that wretched Harry Potter," and criticizing it as "rubbish [that] will eventually be rubbed down" in an interview in *The Atlantic* (Gritz, 2003). Still, one can hardly refute its popularity, and it is largely for this reason that Rowling's work is included among such time-tested fantasy novels as those by Tolkien, Lewis, and Le Guin.

Judging from its popularity, especially among young people, many students in the early Twenty-first Century are familiar with the *Harry Potter* novels from their childhoods and may appreciate an opportunity for an intellectual exploration of their childhood favorite, or at least an academic validation of their literary interests. The task of a teacher of critical literacy is to help students make meaning from texts by engaging them with worthwhile reading material, and *Harry Potter* may enable a teacher to capitalize on the interests of students and demonstrate the literary depth of a novel that may have beguiled them as children.

There is much a student can learn from *Harry Potter*. The series provides a measure of moral guidance, and Harry himself generally portrays an admirable character. The novels contain some clever wordplay (e.g., Diagon Alley, the Mirror of Erised, the *Avada Kedavra* curse) and pseudo-Latin magic spells (e.g., *lumos*, *petrificus totalus*, *wingardium leviosa*), a unique sporting event (i.e., quidditch), and numerous other tongue-in-cheek elements, though mostly of the sophomoric variety. The writing

is more pedestrian (Bloom, 2000) than that of the other works discussed above and puts few burdens on the reader, allowing him or her to concentrate on and enjoy Rowling's plotting and character development.

An important distinction among works within the literary genre of fantasy is the categorization of a work within fantasy sub-genres, a distinction which can be useful in the classroom as students often become engaged in debates over the relative quality of such works as Tolkien's and Rowling's, for example. *The Lord of the Rings* is, according to Shippey (2002), high fantasy²⁸ bordering on the mythic, while the *Harry Potter* books are, according to Le Lievre (2003), *wainscot fantasy*. Shippey, who applies a framework of literary modes²⁹ developed by Frye (1957) in *Anatomy of Criticism*, describes Tolkien's novel as operating variously in all five levels, from the *ironic* to the *mythic*, navigating between one and the other, often within the same scene. Shippey (2002, p. 222) points out, as an example, the "mythic...rope-crossing into Lórien" in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Tolkien, 1954) which incorporates depictions of Sam (an ironic character), Frodo (low mimesis), Boromir (high mimesis), and Legolas (romance) in a work that is occasionally a "traditional bourgeois novel" while it "aspires in places to mythic meaning" (Shippey, 2002, pp. 222-223). Shippey's analysis suggests that part of Tolkien's purpose is to explore the subconscious impact of myth on society and on the individual, and on the implications of the negotiations which invariably take place between the modern and the mythic.

²⁸ High fantasy, according to Clute and Grant (1997), is a term considered synonymous with "sword and sorcery" and refers to a fantasy subgenre "featuring muscular heroes in violent conflict with a variety of villains, chiefly wizards, witches, evil spirits, and other creatures" (p. 915) with supernatural powers.

²⁹ According to Frye (1957), the five literary modes are defined by the characters. In a work operating on the level of *irony*, characters are perceived as weaker than the reader or more ignorant, and they are often treated comically; in works of *low mimesis*, characters are on par with the reader in ability, though not necessarily in social class; in works of *high mimesis*, characters possess abilities that are superior in degree to the reader, but still exist in the same sort of environment—they are simply larger-than-life representations of people similar to the reader; in works of *romance*, characters are superior both in degree and in environment to the reader, though they are fundamentally human-like and include such creatures as elves, dwarves, goblins, and the like; in works of *myth*, the highest literary mode, characters are superior both in kind and in environment, and they operate on a different plane of existence, such as gods and demons.

Wainscot fantasy, as Clute and Grant (1997) discuss it, refers to fantasy stories wherein the fantasy society lives “behind the wainscots” of normal human society (*i.e.*, the dominant world), invisible or undetected. Part or all of the tension of these types of fantasy occur as a result of the intersection of these societies within the story. As a representative of the sub-genre, *Harry Potter* seems focused more on the interactions between the cultures of the fantasy world and the “Primary Reality” in which it is placed. Instead of “aspiring to mythic meaning,” Le Lievre argues that Rowling’s work involves “a deeper examination of paradigms of imaginative engagement with the environment which are available to modern Western cultures, and the consequences of engaging them at all” (Le Lievre, 2003, p. 28), pointing out by way of example the portrayal of “Muggle culture [which] is emotionally and imaginatively barren” (Le Lievre, 2003, p. 27) as illustrated through Rowling’s exploration of the Dursleys, Harry’s adoptive—and spiteful—parents and contrasting this unappealing Muggle culture with the wizarding culture which displays “an intense imaginative engagement with its environment” (Le Lievre, 2003, p. 27). Rowling’s purpose, Le Lievre suggests, is to explore “the disengagement of modern Western cultures from their environment” (Le Lievre, 2003, p. 34). In brief, Tolkien seems more interested in how modern society negotiates with its distant past, while Rowling prefers to explore how modern society deals with its present.

Despite the dramatically different purposes of each work, both might be able to be used to teach the skills of critical literacy. The protagonist of the *Harry Potter* books is the titular character who begins as a marginalized boy of eleven. His voice is silenced by his oppressive and often antagonistic adoptive Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia Dursley, by his abusive bully of a cousin Dudley, and by his overbearing and spiteful Hogwarts potions teacher Professor Snape—all older authority figures whose voices are themselves validated in the text, if not by society then (as is the case with

Dudley) by each other. Harry does receive a significant amount of respect from other characters in the text, such as his friends and fellow students Ron and Hermione; the gameskeeper Hagrid, a half-giant whose good-natured jocular and marginal slow-wittedness, identify him as ironic, and nearly childlike himself; and Professor Dumbledore, the Hogwarts School headmaster, whose power and authority are widely respected in the school community and whose validation is therefore most meaningful to Harry and, by extension, the reader.

Throughout his academic year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Harry must deal with the stress of navigating the largely-unfamiliar environment of the “wizarding world,” avoid the tauntings of his bullying schoolmate Draco Malfoy and his cronies, and deal with the residual pressures of being an orphan, pressures which have come home to him as he attends the school both his parents attended, a fact of which he is (almost literally) painfully cognizant when he sees them in the Mirror of Erised: “[Harry] had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness” (Rowling, 1997, p. 259).

The issues Harry faces are comparable to those faced by the average teen and pre-teen student who attends a new school: New friends, new teachers, bullies, an unfamiliar setting, and more-difficult school work, to name just a few. Add to this the abandonment he feels at the loss of his parents and the abuses he has suffered at the hands of the Dursleys, and it is clear that Harry’s struggle is uphill throughout most of the book. Through his own courage, a little luck, and the support of his friends Ron, Hermione, and Hagrid as well as Professor Dumbledore, Harry successfully negotiates the challenges he faces. Thus, *Harry Potter* is a Bildungsroman charting Harry’s growth from an uncertain, tentative eleven-year-old who is intimidated by his aunt and uncle to a confident, outspoken young boy who is not afraid to assert himself: “ ‘Oh, I will [have a good summer holiday],’ said Harry, and they were surprised at the grin that

was spreading over his face. ‘*They* [the Dursleys] don’t know we’re not allowed to use magic at home. I’m going to have a lot of fun with Dudley this summer...’ ” (Rowling, 1997, p. 384).

Clearly, the reader is meant to accept Harry’s perspective as the novel opens. His role as orphan in the home of abusive relatives bequeaths the position of underdog, a position with which the audience immediately sympathizes. The compassion of the reader is further secured when the horrid treatment of his aunt and uncle surfaces almost immediately when Harry’s Aunt Petunia shouts, “ ‘Up! Get up! Now!’ ” (Rowling, 1997, p. 22) in an effort to awaken young Harry who is instantly put to work cooking bacon. Throughout the early stages of the novel, Harry’s life with the Dursleys is illuminated, a life intended to position the reader to sympathize with Harry’s plight: Dudley enjoys punching Harry, especially in the nose; Harry is often left to look at pictures of cats with the elderly Mrs. Figg while the rest of the family enjoys a fun outing; Harry is verbally abused (“ ‘Comb your hair!’ [Uncle Vernon] barked by way of a morning greeting” [Rowling, 1997, p. 25]) and ignored (“The Dursleys often spoke about Harry like this, as though he wasn’t there—or rather as though he was something very nasty that couldn’t understand them, like a slug” [Rowling, 1997, pp. 27-28]); the Dursleys have assigned Harry a tiny cupboard under the stairs as a bedroom; and even on the day he turns eleven, not only does Harry have no expectations for presents, he has little confidence that the Dursleys will even remember his birthday.

It is through evoking sympathy that Rowling positions the reader to accept Harry’s perspective and to smile wryly when Hagrid, in a fit of rage, causes a pig’s tail to grow on Dudley’s ample bottom. Such vindictiveness is clearly at variance with the Christian perspective presented in C.S. Lewis’s (1950) novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, but the extremity of abuse Harry has suffered throughout the early chapters of the novel positions the reader to accept and validate that vindictiveness. But

what if Harry chided Hagrid for losing his temper and punishing Dudley? After all, such vigilante justice—even if apparently justified—is rarely approved in society. For Hagrid to allow his emotions to cloud his judgment, harming Dudley (a boy of barely eleven) and defying a punishment inflicted by his own wizard community (Hagrid admits that his wand was broken by the authorities after he was expelled from Hogwarts and that he is not supposed to work magic) are not admirable actions. But to watch a bully “get his own” at the hands of the victim’s protector, can cause a reader to see beyond the morality and ethics of a situation.

Similarly, a simple act of consideration may have saved Harry from enduring the antagonisms of Draco Malfoy, an arrogant young wizard whom Harry first encounters in Madame Malkin’s Robes for All Occasions shop. Harry encounters him again on the train ride to Hogwarts. When Draco introduces himself, and Ron, whom Harry had just met, sniggers at his name, Draco makes a cold remark about him to Harry, then proffers his hand. Harry refuses to shake it, however, an act which embarrasses Draco and cements his dislike of Harry, creating a rivalry that will last nearly throughout the seven-book series. Had Harry simply smiled warmly and befriended Draco, he might have been able to reconcile him with Ron and even Hermione, or at least cooled the open hostilities Draco seemed to foment.

Another enmity surfaces between Harry and the Potions Master, Professor Severus Snape. Throughout his Potions class, Professor Snape tries to embarrass Harry, treating him with disdain, an attitude that thoroughly confuses Harry. Instead of approaching Professor Snape privately and trying to understand his dislike, Harry simply gives up on his teacher, accepting this undeserved persecution and hating him right back. Such a close-minded attitude causes needless suffering in the future, as Professor Snape, an older and presumably wiser person than the young Harry, might have been able to move past his childish dislike of Harry instead of taking out on Harry

his long-suppressed loathing of James Potter, Harry's dead father who, as a fellow student at Hogwarts, bullied and tortured Snape.

These three incidents of vindictiveness, intolerance, and animosity can be re-interpreted and used to open conversations about tolerance and forgiveness, exploring the temptations a student might face who desperately desires revenge but knows how inappropriate it might be. Or a student suffering abuse at the hands of a bully could try to understand the perspective of his antagonist and in this way might rise above the petty retribution to which he likely feels inclined. Through Harry's actions (or inactions), a student might wonder how they could stand up for themselves and still show respect for others, or question whether through their own actions—intentional or not—they might treat others in a disrespectful and unfair manner. Finally, because the young boys and girls—wizards and witches in training—stand to gain untold power throughout their years of study at Hogwarts, lessons of responsibility and ethical behavior are appropriate topics of discussion among the readers of the novel, even if the characters themselves are not taught the ethics of the use of magical power, except for the legislated morality some characters voice concerning the wizarding laws enforced by the Ministry of Magic.

Rowling's positioning of the reader to sympathize with Harry, her methods of both silencing and validating Harry's voice, the text's acceptance (even promotion) of the vengeance—no matter how petty—taken by the “good” characters, Harry's struggles with issues of bullying, abuse, and abandonment, and the opportunities within the text to explore ethical behavior suggest that teachers may help readers develop critical literacy skills through reading J.K. Rowling's (1997) novel *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

Summary

Throughout this chapter, some of the most prominent fantasy texts of the Twentieth Century have been interpreted with respect to the elements of critical literacy: C.S. Lewis's (1950) *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, J.R.R. Tolkien's (1937) *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954, 1955), Ursula K. Le Guin's (1968) *A Wizard of Earthsea*, and J.K. Rowling's (1997) *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Each has been shown to have the potential to help develop key elements of critical literacy in students, thus suggesting their appropriateness in the high school English classroom: each text positions the reader to accept a particular cultural discourse, each text validates and silences particular voices, each text deals with important themes and issues, each text can be interpreted in ways that re-envision the texts and help develop our understanding of the world more richly, and each text provides opportunities for readers to reflect critically on their own behaviors.

Some elements present in Lewis's (1950) *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* were discussed, such as the strong moral theme present in the book, including ways the author positioned readers to accept the Christian dogma represented in the text; the elevation of the male perspective above the female; and the issues of familial trust, the value of loyalty, and the price of betrayal. Tolkien's (1937) *The Hobbit* was analyzed, in particular its treatment of social class, the absence of females from the text, the issues of vengeance and greed, and the moral ambiguity of Bilbo's actions regarding his theft of Thorin's precious Arkenstone gem. Tolkien's (1954, 1955) *The Lord of the Rings* was viewed in terms of its promotion of personal responsibility and self-sacrifice, the strength and variety of female voices, its presentation of Good and Evil, and the manner in which the text addresses the complex modern concept of addiction. Le Guin's (1968) *A Wizard of Earthsea* was examined in relation to its views of Good and Evil, gender roles, the significance and power of language, the impact of pride on the

individual, and the interconnectedness of all things in the world. Finally, Rowling's (1997) first novel, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, was discussed. Its treatment of Harry as an underdog, its exploration of retribution versus forgiveness, its views on friendship and bullying, and its perspective on power (and its abuse) were all discussed. Each of these texts was assessed against the rubric of critical literacy in order to ascertain its value as a vehicle for teaching the requisite skills associated with the theory.

The next chapter will discuss practical methods of research that can be used to determine whether such literary analyses are supported in the classroom, whether such texts as these can actually be used to help students develop critical literacy skills. In the chapter, the theoretical foundation for such a method of study as well as practical examples of other research into the development of critical literacy skills will be discussed.

Chapter Five: Methodology

The major research question with which this thesis is concerned is, *To what extent can critical literacy skills be taught through the use of fantasy literature?* The thesis involves an examination of practice in selected Connecticut high school English classes which employ works of fantasy literature to teach skills associated with critical literacy. The question is significant because critical literacy provides students with the skills and perspective to learn and apply the lessons taught by literature to their own lives in order to improve themselves and the world around them.

The research sub-questions identified in Chapter One concern the development of critical literacy skills in high school students through the use of fantasy literature and are listed below:

1. What is critical literacy, and what are its key elements?
2. How are critical literacy skills successfully taught?
3. What is fantasy literature? How is it defined?
4. What elements of critical literacy are demonstrated in fantasy literature?
5. What are some of the benefits and detriments of using fantasy literature as a vehicle to engender critical literacy skills?
6. What factors within the case studies being examined impact the successful teaching of critical literacy through fantasy literature?
7. Which high schools in Connecticut will be selected for study and why?
8. What are the most appropriate methods for such an examination?

The first five questions have been addressed in the above chapters in a theoretical way; the final three questions will be used to drive the research design for this thesis—the case study—which will be argued in the following pages.

Concerning the above research sub-questions, questions six and seven deserve elaboration since the factors alluded to significantly impact the selection of methodology and research design. The factors that this thesis will examine, which provide a broad, multi-dimensional perspective of teaching and learning in a classroom, include primarily (a) the teacher, (b) the student, (c) the lessons delivered in the classroom, and (d) the work produced by students. Secondary factors include the school culture and the school administration. Each of these elements will be discussed in greater detail during this chapter, including a description of the types of data that will be gathered, why those data are needed, and how their analysis will be integrated into the final results of the study.

Subjects for each case study will be selected based upon opportunity sampling. The specificity of research topics—critical literacy and fantasy literature—preclude random sampling of subjects, fantasy literature being a less-common subject of study in Connecticut high school English classes than are more realistic works. An extended discussion of the selection process will be developed in the following chapter.

The current chapter will examine the nature of educational research as it pertains to the main research question of this thesis, including ontological and epistemological concerns. It will argue for the appropriateness of a qualitative methodology employing the case study, bounded by the teaching of a fantasy work, as the most appropriate design to address the needs of the research. Some of the aspects of qualitative educational research methodology germane to this thesis and two of the research sub-questions—*What factors within the case studies being examined impact the successful teaching of critical literacy skills through fantasy literature? What are the most appropriate methods for such an examination?*—will be discussed. Finally, issues of trustworthiness and authenticity will be discussed within the context of this argument, as well as any relevant ethical issues.

Nature of educational research

Discussions and debates of educational research and policy-making have been taking place for well over a hundred years (Sperling & DiPardo, 2008), but researchers have yet to agree on a “best methodology” which will yield accurate, reliable results that policy-makers can use to effect useful change in education. Indeed, given the varying nature of educational research (*e.g.*, differing contexts, research purposes, data to be gathered, or needs of the researcher), one methodology that would suit all purposes might be as useless a search as it is fruitless. Many educational researchers and theorists have written about the debate between qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Hammersley, 1992; Pring, 2000, 2004; Gorard, 2002; Greene, 2005; St.Pierre, 2006; Lees, 2007; et al.), and while no conclusive methodology has arisen, the recommendations that have been put forward are surprisingly consistent given the depth of opposition between proponents of the two dominant methodologies, and provide critical guidelines for the educational researcher.

Epistemologically-speaking, qualitative and quantitative researchers tend to view the world in fundamentally different ways. Qualitative researchers generally espouse a *constructivist* perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998), seeing the world as a social construct where meaning (*i.e.*, knowledge) is created through social interactions, from which the social researcher is not immune. Quantitative researchers, on the other hand, support a *positivist* perspective (Bryman, 1988), that there is an apprehendable world and that objectivity is possible for the scientific researcher. The two views seem to be linked through *empiricism*, but an empiricism informed, for the qualitative researcher by *phenomenology*, and for the quantitative researcher by *inductivist* beliefs (Bryman, 1988). Denzin & Lincoln (1998) provide a particularly succinct comparison of the two perspectives:

Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasizes the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes. Inquiry is purported to be within a value-free framework. (p. 8)

Clearly, the influence of the natural sciences, with emphasis on measurement and causality, can be seen in the perspective of the quantitative researcher, while the qualitative researcher, interested in social construction and acknowledging the interaction between researcher and subject, embraces a more *naturalistic* perspective (Bryman, 1988).

Quantitative research, guided as it is by theory, tends to be more interested in testing a hypothesis, while qualitative research, supporting emergent theory, is more interested in exploring an issue (Bryman, 1988). Or, to put it tersely, the former concerns itself with ‘what is’ or ‘what works’ (Oancea & Pring, 2008), while the latter is concerned with ‘what is likely’ or ‘what may work.’ The uncertainty of qualitative research seems to be supported by the vagaries of human nature, especially in a constantly-changing world such as we live in.

The qualitative methodology is founded on a constructivist epistemology—valuing and making meaning from the experiences of respondents—that is based upon empiricism, a view supported by Bryman (1988) and Denzin & Lincoln (1998), especially as it concerns qualitative research participant observation. In considering whether constructivism provides a valid foundation for an epistemology, Frede (1990) offers support for the empirical basis for qualitative research, though in an admittedly qualified way:

There is no doubt that the empiricists took the view that the degree to which an outcome is expected, the confidence with which an outcome is predicted and the assumed likelihood or probability that a certain outcome will result, are a function of relative frequency in experience.

But it also seems clear that the empiricists did not proceed to try to determine the experienced relative frequency in numerical terms, or to attach a numerical value to the degree of expectation or assumed likelihood. (p. 246)

It is Frede's final observation, that no numerical value is attached to the frequency of the expected outcome that further distinguishes qualitative research from quantitative, but this lack of precision need not be seen as a drawback which undermines qualitative research: indeed, human beings behave in myriad ways when faced with the same or similar circumstances, even the same human being facing the same situation at different times, may respond in different ways. How can one quantify human nature? Might not such a precise quantification, were it applied to one's behavior, even be misleading? Even so, results informed by a qualitative methodology may be qualified linguistically: "To some extent all methods of educational research deal with qualities, even when the observed qualities are counted. Similarly, most methods of analysis use some form of number, such as 'tend, most, some, all, none, few' and so on" notes Gorard (2002, p. 346), an observation echoed in Hammersley (1992).

There is the way the world "works," which is according to natural laws (*e.g.*, physics and chemistry) and the way humans work, which is according to their own individual, internal logic. Human interactions—countless millions each day—create social realities, the aggregate of which within a social setting (*e.g.*, a country) define a society. Each of these "realities" is more constructivist than positivistic because human nature is not absolute and unvarying from individual to individual, and each person's internal logic and their view of the world differs as well, even on a daily basis. This can easily be seen by even the briefest of examinations of different cultures through language and social structures. Knowledge does not reside in either extreme (*i.e.*, positivist or relativist) because of the influence that humans have on their environment

and on each other, but rather social and educational knowledge is created *through* those interactions, leaning toward the relativist position but not ignoring the positivist position entirely. It is because of the virtual unpredictability (*i.e.*, compared with the degree of certainty that one can predict, for example, the behavior of a ball when bounced) of human behavior that a quantitative approach to research which is undergirded by a philosophy of positivism is less likely to produce epistemologically valid—and useful—conclusions than the qualitative approach which is undergirded by constructivism. While a quantitative methodology can be seen as more appropriate for research that yields statistical generalizations and quantifiable probabilities, a qualitative methodology can be viewed as more appropriate for studies of singularities in which a past outcome must be interpreted or predictions in which a future outcome is suggested through “fuzzy generalizations” (Bassey, 1999).

Arguments for the use of a case study design

Developing an appropriate methodology then depends upon the nature of the phenomena studied. While some researchers have used case study designs where qualitative methods have been employed as the foundation for their inquiries into the teaching of critical literacy, that fact alone does not necessarily substantiate the use of the case study as the optimum design. Quantitative approaches tend to be more effective than qualitative methods for evaluating behaviours that can be counted, but “are less effective in analyzing complex, multidimensional characteristics of a phenomenon” (Birnbaum, et al., 2005, p. 125) such as entailed by studying the development of critical literacy skills. Birnbaum, et al. (2005) points to the employment of the *case study* as a qualitative approach that offers greater depth of exploration of the research questions, and this is the methodology that, it is argued, is most appropriate to address the research questions identified in this thesis.

According to Bassey (1999), four arenas of educational research, existing in two broad categories (*i.e.*, quantitative and qualitative), can be identified: surveys, experiments, action researches, and case studies. Each of these types of researches will be discussed in the context of the question that drives this thesis. Interestingly, Bassey identifies the survey as an example of quantitative research and the experiment as qualitative. However, Bryman (1988) and Cresswell (2003) both categorize the experiment as quantitative. This discrepancy may exist because Bryman and Cresswell seem to make their division based upon the degree of *control* over the circumstances of the research that is exhibited by the researcher, while Bassey's division seems based upon the resulting types of generalizations (*i.e.*, fuzzy or statistical) that can be drawn from the conclusions. For purposes of this thesis, the categorization is immaterial, as neither is an appropriate method to obtain data that would answer the main research question.

The most important data to be collected during the course of this investigation involve human behaviors (*i.e.*, teaching and learning) that cannot be replicated or repeated with precision, behaviors that are not always predictable or regular and that are impacted by a variety of factors, such as the personalities of the students who populate a classroom, the individual classroom dynamic, the teacher's mood and that of her students, the time of day a lesson is implemented, or the physical arrangement of the classroom space (Eggen & Kauchak, 1999). The data concerning the extent to which a subject or skill can be taught revolve around several primary factors—the teacher, the students, the climate in a classroom, the work produced by students (including class and small group conversations)—and to a lesser degree, the broader context of a school culture and the community in which a school is situated. Because of these unique, highly individual factors, quantitative methods of obtaining data such as surveys and experiments cannot produce a view of teaching and learning critical literacy skills with

sufficient dimensions to be reliable, valid, or generalizable. Therefore, a design which admits multiple dimensions and offers the opportunity for contextualizing and analyzing complex human behaviors—as provided through a case study—is the most appropriate for this thesis when it employs a qualitative methodology.

Design approaches used in other studies

In studying various methods by which critical literacy skills can be taught in schools, researchers have generally relied on qualitative methodologies, most frequently within a case study design. Four studies into the teaching of critical literacy skills (Goodburn, 1998; Hines & Appleman, 2000; Lewison, et al., 2002; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) will be analyzed below as they relate to the methodological concerns of this research project. Each of the studies employed a qualitative methodology, most frequently using a case study design, bounded by either an individual teacher or an individual class, as the unit of analysis. None of the research identified explores the connection between fantasy literature and critical literacy skills, underscoring the significance of this thesis. Three of the studies (Goodburn, 1998; Hines & Appleman, 2000; Lewison et al, 2002) were published in peer-reviewed academic journals that specialize in publishing research and other articles related to pedagogy for English teachers. The fourth study (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) is a book devoted to analyzing the development of critical literacy skills in students.

Under the umbrella of ethnography, Goodburn (1998) uses a case study design approach to explore the concept of critical research through close observations and analysis of three writing classes. Critical research, defined by Goodburn as “an inquiry that seeks to question, disrupt, or intervene in the conditions under study for some socially transformative end” (Goodburn, 1998, p. 122), has much to do with critical literacy theory in the way it is focused on social transformation and questioning the

status quo. The data for her study is drawn from her dissertation project, “a study of students’ and teachers’ responses within three university writing courses” (Goodburn, 1998, p. 122), in which she and a research assistant observed three university writing classes, one taught by Goodburn herself, and the remaining two by other teachers. She does not note whether the teachers all worked in the same university. While her work in this publication does not study critical literacy techniques *per se* in the classroom, her theory is clearly based upon the same notions, and the focus of her dissertation work is on classroom experiences. The Goodburn study is germane to this research project in that the outward generalizations are drawn from particular instances of classroom practice, supporting the notion that a qualitative methodology is appropriate to use when examining such phenomena, specifically a design that employs the case study as its foundation for data-gathering and analysis.

Furthermore, Goodburn provides some suggestions for teachers performing ethnographic research in classrooms. These suggestions relate to concepts of trustworthiness and authenticity, concepts which will be discussed later in this chapter. She notes that ethnographers need to be aware of “the possible roles they may be forced to claim [in the classroom] as well as those they may be forced to adopt” (Goodburn, 1998, p. 141). By the term “roles,” Goodburn is referring to the position an ethnographer may occupy, such as that of “independent observer,” “teacher-participant,” “potential teacher,” “authority figure,” and “judgmental observer” to name but a few.

Related to the concept of positioning is the idea that the participants in the study have varying degrees of investment in the outcome. For example, the researcher has a strong investment in their presence, due to the importance of the results of the project, while the students have little investment comparatively speaking, since they are presumably in the classroom to learn, not to be objects of study.

Thirdly, Goodburn points out the privatized view of the classroom held by teachers and students, who often view themselves in isolation from an outside context and who may see themselves as the “owners” of the classroom while others, such as the researcher, may be perceived as “outsiders” or even “intruders.”

Finally, Goodburn advises researchers to be conscious of how they conduct themselves in a research setting, addressing issues of compensation for the teacher-participant, negotiations to clarify issues revolving around interpretation and the representation of the classroom, and the sharing of field notes and other gathered data. Beyond a simple awareness of these four issues, Goodburn does not offer practical advice to counter them. Each of these issues is consistent with that of other researchers into methodological issues, and their implications for this research project will be addressed later within this chapter.

A study by Hines and Appleman (2000) argues the applicability of contemporary literary theory to the study of literary texts in the classroom. The researchers note that they “will use data from case studies of literature classrooms” (Hines & Appleman, 2000, p. 142) from which they draw conclusions. In other words, their generalizations are broadly contextualized in methodologies that employ a few individual cases deeply, rather than a large number of cases at a more superficial level. The Hines and Appleman study, more than the Goodburn study, applies to this research project because of the subject matter (*i.e.*, literary theory as it relates to the study of literature), the setting (*i.e.*, the classroom), and the overarching research design (*i.e.*, case study). Further connections can be seen in the construction of the case itself which is comprised of “observed, videotaped, and transcribed class discussions, multiple interviews with each focal teacher and at least two students from each class, and copies of all written work completed by students during the units of observation” (Hines & Appleman, 2000, p. 146), all elements—with the exception of videotaping—that will be

included in this research project (see Chapter Seven for a complete discussion of the case study design) which make this study particularly appropriate as a design model.

An important aspect of the Hines and Appleman study concerns the scope of the research, which involves three separate studies that include seven secondary and four college teachers. Selections of the teachers in the latter two studies involved choosing high-quality teachers whose “literary orientations” differed from those of the first group. Reasons for selecting teachers of high quality were not provided. Although the quality of instruction seems not to be a factor since the study was not designed as a comparative experiment which might measure the latter groups of teachers against the original “control” group, the results of the study would seem to be skewed in favor of the authors’ thesis and should be noted as a limitation to their research—though it is not. Since the argument of the study is that “contemporary literary theories can enrich literature instruction in both high school and college classrooms” (Hines & Appleman, 2000, p. 142), then noting the quality of the instructor seems like a significant enough factor that it should be acknowledged since the results hinge greatly on that variable. This limitation is not addressed in the findings of the study.

While the data-gathering procedure was clearly outlined, the data-analysis in the Hines and Appleman study was less so, including “recursively analyz[ing] the data within and across cases, developing categories, adding evidence to test and refine those categories, as we eventually developed working hypotheses to take into account the tensions and contradictions in our data” (Hines & Appleman, 2000, p. 146). It seems this somewhat loose method of analysis is intended to measure the word “enrich,” suggesting that the authors were unsure what factors to examine or what variables might suggest enrichment in a literature classroom. Earlier, the authors imply that by “enrich,” they mean that the use of literary theories can offer “ways of seeing and interpreting ourselves and our surroundings beyond the world of the classroom” (Hines

& Appleman, 2000, p. 142). Given that no objective or independent rubric is employed against which to measure the data, the results must be expressed in subjective terms and as such would be difficult to replicate. They are also highly contextual and dependent upon such factors as the skill of the teacher, the richness of the text, the investment of the students, and the appropriateness of the literary theory to the analyzed text not to mention the quality and meticulousness of the researcher performing the data analysis. Nevertheless, the construction of the case study and the similarity of the purpose of the Hines and Appleman (2000) research to this thesis (not to mention the connection between what is meant by the term “enrichment” and what is implied by critical literacy), suggest that a case study approach that emphasizes depth over breadth is an appropriate design to employ when analyzing the learning outcome of a literary unit of study.

Lewison, et al. (2002) explore the teaching of critical literacy as done by novice teachers and newcomers to critical literacy pedagogy. Their research—using thirteen subjects in case studies each bounded by the teaching of a particular piece of literature—again employs a qualitative methodology and a case study design. While the critical literacy focus of the Lewison, et al. (2002) study is identical to that of this thesis, the former is concerned more with the pedagogical approach of the teacher in engendering critical literacy than in the learning outcome that results from its use in the classroom. Still, the philosophical approach of elevating the epistemological value of the depth provided by a case study as opposed to the breadth of teacher surveys (to use an example from quantitative methodology) in the illumination of teaching practice is a significant warrant.

The data gathered by Lewison, et al. (2002) is rich and varied, including “preworkshop questionnaires, postworkshop evaluations, teacher-authored progress reports, workshop field notes, transcripts of teacher talk at workshops, transcripts of

study group sessions, classroom observation field notes, student artifacts, and transcripts of student literature circle discussions” (Lewison, et al., 2002, p. 385). Such a multiplicity of sources indicates a triangulation of data which improves the trustworthiness of the results. Using such tools as grids and coded data from the study of all thirteen teachers, the researchers focused on the cases of two teachers in greater depth—one a newcomer and one a novice—to illustrate the application of the various dimensions of critical literacy in the classroom. Each case is discussed in detail, sharing anecdotes of the teacher’s use of critical literacy theory and providing evidence of the various dimensions. The significant connective feature is the researchers’ implicit acknowledgement that the depth provided by two case study exemplars was deemed sufficient to illustrate the results and guarantee trustworthiness.

McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) explore the use of critical literacy in classrooms, focusing on the teachers, the units of study, and teacher-student interactions, the student-produced work, and the teacher’s own reflections—analyzed afterward by the researchers. Their book is divided into two sections. The first part “demystifies critical literacy,” explaining the theory behind the process. The second part is devoted to illustrating how teachers use the theory to analyze literature with students. While this is more of a “how-to” book on using critical literacy theory in the classroom, it is still relevant to this thesis because of its use of case studies to demonstrate and comment critically upon the development of critical literacy skills by thirteen teachers in classrooms ranging from grade one to grade eight. Text synopses are provided as well as extended discussions of activities, verbal student responses, written student work, and critical commentary by the authors. Each case provides a multi-dimensional perspective on the use of critical literacy in various classrooms and, as such, is germane to this thesis.

There are two issues of concern when considering the work of McLaughlin and DeVoogd as a precedent for this study of critical literacy. The first is that the case studies do not provide a great deal of depth. While there is some brief discussion by the teacher concerning the broadest outline of the unit of study (which is bounded, in each case, by the text being read), the authors do not conduct—or at least do not share information regarding—extended interviews with the teachers.

The second issue concerns the grade level. McLaughlin and DeVoogd are concerned with illustrating the use of critical literacy in primary grades, while this thesis is concerned with secondary students. This is a marginal issue, however. The theory of critical literacy does not change from grade to grade; only the practical applications—the texts themselves, the types of student responses given, and perhaps even the classroom activities—change with the grade levels. Therefore, the design of the study of critical literacy in the classroom should remain fairly consistent.

In each of these instances, the authors employed a qualitative methodology and used a case study design to study the learning of a particular skill in the classroom, examining the context from multiple perspectives and providing data from several sources, including the teacher (interviews, classroom observations, and lesson design), students (interviews, classroom responses, and written work), and the researcher (commentary and analysis), in order to create a multi-dimensional view of learning. The studies themselves are bounded by the teaching of the literature and examine, in varying degrees, the classroom context, the methods of the teacher, and the learning outcomes. Some texts delve into greater detail about classroom activities, including transcribed classroom observations, but the general approach is virtually the same and underscores the importance and relevance of a qualitative methodology and a case study design approach.

Critiques of the four studies above offer guidance for the research conducted within this thesis. In the Goodburn (1998) study, for example, the author herself was one of the three participants in the study, creating a possible conflict of interest. She also notes the varying degrees of investment among the participants in the outcome of the study. Neither of these concerns should impact this research, since the three subjects for the study will be chosen using opportunity sampling (see Chapter Six) and each will be selected from different schools. Additionally, the concern over the investment of the individuals in the outcome of the Goodburn study will be minimized in this research. The teacher-participants selected for this study are chosen in part because they are invested in helping students develop critical literacy skills. The students, in attempting to earn a good grade, will presumably try to meet the standards of critical literacy development established by the teacher. Therefore, each of the participants is similarly invested in the students' development of critical literacy skills. The loose analysis of the data in the Hines and Appleman (2000) study have helped to inform this research study in the form of an objective rubric that will be used to assess the work of the students and measure their progress toward developing critical literacy skills. Finally, both the Lewison, et al. (2002) and the McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) studies are more concerned with the development *in teachers* of obtaining the skills necessary to help students read using critical literacy theory than in the results generated by students. While the approach in examining the results of learning are appropriate, the subjects (*i.e.*, an examination of students as opposed to teachers) requires that an emphasis be placed on the analysis of students work, instead of the teachers' strategies. A consideration of each of these issues and my attempts to address them will help make this research more robust.

Qualitative research methods

One of the principal methods of educational research, qualitative research, broadly speaking, is a highly individualized approach to building knowledge about educational effectiveness in which the researcher is usually “involved in a sustained and intensive experience with [the] participants” of the study (Creswell, 2003, p. 184). Arising from research strategies employed by social scientists, qualitative research (often called ‘ethnography’ or ‘field research’) is interested in “seeing [the world] through the eyes of the people being studied” in a way similar to anthropology (Bryman, 1988, p. 69) and as such can be seen as somewhat improvisational in nature (Boote, 2008).

Qualitative research differs fundamentally from quantitative research in that qualitative research takes place in a natural setting, uses multiple methods of data collection that are interactive and humanistic, is emergent rather than tightly prefigured in regards to a guiding theory, and is fundamentally interpretive (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative researchers see themselves as embedded within the social context, interacting directly with participants in order to gather data, mining deeply to uncover the roots of the participants’ subjective experiences using processes which generally value depth of research over breadth of coverage. Because of the emphasis on social context and the inextricability of the participants from that context, one of the important aspects of qualitative research is to provide elaborate description of the social settings being investigated (Bryman, 1988). Thus, the qualitative researcher builds a three-dimensional vision of the perspective of each participant as opposed to the quantitative researcher who provides wider-ranging but shallower perspectives.

Many different strategies exist with which to gather data for qualitative research to develop this three-dimensional perspective, including participant observation, unstructured, in-depth interviewing (Bryman, 1988), and discourse analysis (Griffin,

2005). These strategies generally provide the researcher with a great deal of flexibility in their data gathering (Bryman, 1988), enabling them to pursue avenues of thought they may not have anticipated before their research began and providing an open-ended view of “research as inquiry” rather than “research as theory validation”. This is not to imply that qualitative researchers do not know what they are searching for; they merely reject a strict theoretical framework which they feel may restrict their research too much and conflict with the perspectives of the participants (Bryman, 1988), thus constraining their path of inquiry.

Once the data have been gathered, the researcher must engage in the process of interpretation and validation, the latter being particularly important to the qualitative researcher (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Creswell, 2003). Data analysis, for the qualitative researcher, involves “making sense of the data *in terms of the participants’ definitions of the situation*, noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities” (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 461, my emphasis). The above phrase is emphasized because it is unique to the qualitative researcher, the other elements of analysis being common with quantitative research. Interpretations of these data pose distinctive challenges because of the very open-endedness which is a hallmark of qualitative research. If a researcher has no particular guiding theory, no framework within which to interpret results, and has instead deeply-personal, highly-contextual, richly-informed responses, then the process of synthesizing the data and generalizing results from them may be problematic.

Fortunately, Cohen, et al. (2007) attempt to mitigate this problem by outlining a method of *content analysis*, which “defines the process of summarizing and reporting written data” and can help the researcher identify and describe “patterns and trends in communicative content” (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 476). Additionally, Doucet and Mauthner (2008) discuss another potential solution to this problem—a model of analysis called a *Listening Guide* which “employs multiple and successive ‘readings’ of

interview transcripts” (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008, p. 405) in order to analyze variously the researcher’s own assumptions and interpretation of the subject, how the subjects view themselves within their social world, the “social networks, and close intimate relations” (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008, p. 406) of the subjects, and the “structured power relations and dominant ideologies that frame narratives” (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008, p. 406). Using these or other methods (see Griffin, 2005), qualitative researchers can analyze data and work toward developing trustworthy and authentic interpretations.

Validity, note Bryman (2001) and Creswell (2003), is a strength of qualitative research, though Creswell qualifies his assessment by noting that validity “is used to suggest determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account” (Creswell, 2003, pp. 195-196) so that to the extent that each of these three perspectives converge, the inferences may be seen as valid. Neither he nor Bryman (1988) can say the same of reliability and generalizability which are more difficult to achieve in qualitative inquiry due to the relatively small number of research subjects.

Another strength of qualitative research is the rich insight into human behavior it can offer (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Because of its emphasis on depth over breadth, qualitative research delves deeply into the perspectives of the participants, offering detailed descriptions and insights into the subject. The degree of richness uncovered by the research is limited by the skills of the researcher in mining the data, however. For example, an unskilled or poorly-trained interviewer may not be able to provide a particularly detailed account of the subject’s perspective. Thus, the richness of the insight and the depth of the research is largely dependent upon the interpersonal skills of the researcher.

An important weakness of qualitative research is that the data can be interpreted in a variety of different ways (Cohen, et al., 2007; Bryman, 1988), a deficiency that can

be addressed to some degree through several strategies outlined above. This is an important criticism that should not be dismissed or minimized, however. Researchers must be aware of *researcher bias*, as the temptation to interpret the research so as to provide results of the project that are favorable to the researcher must be resisted. Freeman, et al. (2007) advise qualitative researchers to employ a degree of skepticism to their own work, suggesting that authors of studies “reveal themselves as their own best critics,... discuss the limits and uncertainties of their work,... [and be forthright about] competing interpretations and explanations for the patterns they claim” (Freeman, et al., 2007, p. 30). Because several of the strategies for enhancing validity, reliability, and generalizability outlined above rely on researcher credibility, it seems especially important that a researcher employing a qualitative methodology be particularly attentive to their ethos, to the thoroughness of their research, and to the accuracy of their interpretations so as to minimize criticisms that might be leveled against their work.

Trustworthiness

The concerns of reliability, validity, and generalizability that face quantitative researchers are recognized by scholars (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Bassey, 1999; Bryman, 2001) to be different from those of qualitative researchers to such an extent that the terms used by quantitative researchers—*reliability*, *validity*, and *generalizability*—are not applicable in their same senses to qualitative researchers.

By its very nature, the results obtained from a case study resist easy assessment using the criteria suggested by the above discussion of reliability. As Bassey (1999) notes:

A case study is the study of a singularity which is chosen because of its interest to the researcher (or the researcher’s sponsor) and, it is hoped, the reader of the case report. It is not chosen as a ‘typical’ example in the sense that typicality is empirically demonstrated, and so issues of external validity are not meaningful. (p. 75)

Reliability is highly unlikely using a case study approach, since the very singularity of the case itself and the context surrounding it precludes precisely the repeated circumstances that the term reliability entails. This is not to suggest that qualitative research cannot be seen as valid. On the contrary, Bryman (2001) notes that validity is often seen as a strength of qualitative research because of the richness of the data obtained. Lincoln and Denzin (1998, pp. 414-415), on whose work much of the following discussion is based, note that qualitative research “is valid if it is sufficiently grounded, triangulated, based on naturalistic indicators, carefully fitted to a theory (and its concepts), comprehensive in scope, credible in terms of member checks, logical, and truthful in terms of its reflection of the phenomenon in question.”

It has been suggested that a new set of criteria with the same goals in mind must be established that would allow the results of qualitative research to be broadly accepted yet would distinguish the assessment of qualitative research from that of quantitative research. To minimize the confusion that may result from qualitative researchers using the same terms as quantitative researchers, a new term—*trustworthiness*—has been posited (Bryman, 2001) which is made up of criteria that embody similar propositions as those devoted to quantitative research. Along with trustworthiness, *authenticity* is another criterion by which qualitative research may be assessed.

In developing criteria by which trustworthiness may be assessed, Bryman (2001) identifies the following terms: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*. Each term will be defined briefly here, and the following chapter will address each in terms of the proposed case study structure, demonstrating how the integrity of each is maintained within the research project.

The term *credibility* refers to the reasonableness of the researcher’s findings and interpretation of the social world under investigation. In other words, credibility addresses the extent to which the researcher’s conclusions are believable. A researcher

can attempt to ensure credibility of the findings through a variety of methods, including establishing and adhering to acceptable practices in social research, participating in prolonged engagement with the subject to help the researcher understand the multiplicity of influences affecting a phenomenon, employing persistent observation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to identify and focus on the most relevant characteristics of the problem being studied, using multiple data sources to analyze the phenomenon (*i.e.*, triangulation) to enrich the data, and by using *respondent* or *member validation* (also called “member-checking” by Creswell & Clark [2007]) which entails that the researcher submit the findings to members of the social world under investigation for confirmation that the researcher has correctly understood and interpreted that social world (though this may result in the respondent either disputing critical or unflattering results, or confirming positive and uncritical results). A researcher who employs these methods can help improve the credibility—and hence the trustworthiness—of their research. In this particular thesis, all interviewed participants will be given an opportunity to review the transcripts of their interview and will be invited to add, delete, or modify any of their responses to ensure accuracy. Additionally, the teacher-participant in each case will be provided with the completed case study draft and encouraged to comment on its accuracy to help ensure the credibility of the research.

Transferability addresses the highly contextualized nature of social research by taking up the issue of whether the results of the research can be extended beyond the boundaries of the particular social world being investigated. In other words, can the results be seen as externally valid? Addressing this issue can be done through what Bryman (2001) terms “thick descriptions” or “rich accounts of the details of a culture” being investigated (Bryman, 2001, p. 272) intended to help others determine the extent to which any other context parallels the context under investigation. Thick descriptions can be achieved through thorough investigations of myriad aspects of a context, a multi-

dimensional approach toward viewing a context with the end result of providing a broad understanding of some of the most significant aspects of the social world. Creswell and Clark (2007) affirm the use of rich, thick descriptions, suggesting that this strategy be coupled with *triangulation* of different data sources to enhance the trustworthiness of the results. Bassey (1999, p. 12) suggests the term “fuzzy generalization” to describe the ways qualitative inquiries may be transferred beyond the context of the study. This generalization “makes no absolute claim to knowledge, but hedges its claim with uncertainties.” In this manner, a qualitative researcher may suggest that a phenomenon is possible or that the singularity of the case study being investigated may likely be repeated under certain circumstances. It is a qualified claim to knowledge.

Dependability is an attempt to address the issue of internal reliability of the findings. In other words, has the researcher observed and understood the data well enough to produce an accurate analysis? This issue can be addressed through the use of an “audit” approach, wherein a researcher would make available all materials, data sets, drafts, and other aspects of the research process to peers who could then verify the results by auditing the process and confirming the data analysis. Admittedly (Bryman, 2001), this is often a challenge in qualitative research since the data sets are traditionally quite large and can prohibit or deter fellow researchers from performing a thorough audit of the results. Creswell and Clark (2007) suggest that the researcher spend prolonged time in the field as a way to immerse themselves in the social setting to improve their understanding of the milieu, and that the researcher employ peer debriefing as well as an external auditor.

Because of the high stakes associated with the writing of a dissertation and the degree of investment the writer has in the outcome of the research project, the results may lack *trustworthiness* due to a lack of *dependability*. In an effort to minimize bias and increase the objectivity of this thesis and thereby improve the *dependability* of the

results, the data from the case studies were independently analyzed by another experienced teacher trained in the use of the rubric and familiar with critical literacy theory who audited the results by applying the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric to the student work and the classroom interactions. The results were compared, four discrepancies were identified, and a conclusion that was mutually-acceptable to the researcher and auditor was determined. In each instance, the assessment of the auditor was given preference over that of the researcher and the results were modified. In this way, researcher bias was minimized and this limitation was addressed.

Lastly, trustworthiness of the results can be improved by addressing *confirmability*, a criterion that parallels the quantitative term *objectivity*. To improve the confirmability of the results, a researcher must show that he/she has acted “in good faith” and not allowed their personal feelings to interfere with the results or sway the findings. Although Bryman (2001) does not provide any suggestions for how to achieve or ensure confirmability, one may suggest that this can be improved through establishing an intellectual distance between the researcher and the subject, through judicious and well-supported interpretations of findings, and through following rigorous and appropriate methodology, in addition to adhering to the other aspects of trustworthiness listed above. Creswell (2003) recommends that the researcher honestly clarify any bias they may hold toward a subject as a sort of “full disclosure” approach, and that the researcher present “*negative or discrepant information* to increase the credibility of the interpretation” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). Overall, social research that is *trustworthy* is methodologically well-designed and implemented sufficiently well to yield the results it claims.

Authenticity

The other of the two primary criteria by which qualitative research may be assessed (Lincoln & Denzin, 1998; Bryman, 2001) is *authenticity*, a measure which seems to largely address the usefulness of the research in question to guide and improve practice rather than the methodological approach taken by the researcher. In addition to the issue of *fairness*, which refers to the equitable representation of myriad viewpoints within a social setting, Bryman (2001) notes four additional issues of authenticity: *ontological*, *educative*, *catalytic*, and *tactical*.

Ontological authenticity addresses the practical aspects of social research in regards to the members of the social milieu inasmuch as the research is expected to help members arrive at a more complete understanding of the social world they inhabit. Part of the purpose of social research, seemingly, is to unlock the mysteries of social phenomena within a given setting, and research that does not add to the store of knowledge regarding that setting lacks ontological authenticity. Research that possesses ontological authenticity can help members understand the complexities behind the mechanics of the social system.

Educative authenticity means that the research can help members of a social system understand and appreciate each other's perspectives better. While research must address the mechanisms of a social setting (*i.e.*, possess ontological authenticity), it must also address the interpersonal aspects as well. To the extent it does so, the research may be said to possess educative authenticity.

Research that has catalytic authenticity can act to provide members with the drive to take action to change their circumstances based on the results of the research. Social research must *catalyze* the members of the system, pushing them to modify their practice in ways that benefit the recipients of their practice. For example, educational research that uncovers the mechanisms of teacher-student verbal interactions in a

classroom setting and that provides teachers with an enhanced appreciation of the student perspective must also impel teachers to modify their own practice based upon the research results. What use is social research if it is not sufficiently compelling to drive practitioners toward change?

Finally, if research has tactical authenticity, it can be said to provide social system members with the sanction to engage in action. This aspect of authenticity addresses the “So what?” question: So what if the research is effective and helpful, if practitioners do not feel they are able to implement the changes necessary to take advantage of the research? Tactically authentic research empowers the practitioner to make the change, to use the research to improve practice.

Authentic social research treats members of a social system with fairness; it addresses the relevant mechanisms of the social system; it helps illuminate the perspectives of the members; it is sufficiently convincing to motivate members to change their behaviors in light of the research; and it can help empower members to engage in necessary action to implement the research.

Ethical guidelines

When conducting educational research, it is important for the researcher to consider ethical issues that may arise while conducting any field work. Bassey (1999) identifies four categories of ethical issues: *Respect for democracy*, defined as the researcher’s right to conduct educational research, to ask questions, to be curious, to investigate and search for the truth; *respect for truth*, which is concerned with the publication of the truth versus respecting the privacy of the individual, as well as being truthful in data collection, analysis, and reporting; *respect for persons*, which involves respecting another’s right to privacy and dignity and remembering that the data was first owned by another individual who is giving the researcher the right to use it; and finally

respect for educational research itself, which involves conducting research in ways that will enhance a teacher's experience of educational research and trying to improve the image of the educational researcher in the perceptions of teachers being studied.

Respect for democracy, as discussed above, can be viewed as a sanction for the researcher to conduct the field work and need not be addressed here at length. The aspect of respect for truth can be complicated when dealing with case study participants who may be understandably reluctant to expose themselves and their practice to public scrutiny, and even using pseudonyms and disguising the name of the school and district may not be sufficient to ensure anonymity, especially for those familiar with the subject. The latter aspect of this category deals with the conduct of the researcher and, as it seems closely tied to issues of trustworthiness (see above), can be addressed in similar ways.

In regards to the issue of respect for persons, researchers of educational practice that explores the behaviors and/or interactions between teachers and students must be cognizant of the teacher's need for privacy, especially when research is conducted within the teacher's classroom. For obvious reasons, the privacy of students is of utmost importance, as the vast majority of them are under the age of majority (18 in the United States) and their privacy must be ensured. Additionally, the possible conflict between a teenager's ego (the preponderance of teen use of Internet social sites such as Facebook and Twitter suggest teenage proclivities toward navel-gazing) and self-esteem concerns may complicate the research process. Moreover, the student-teacher relationship is built upon trust, a trust that can be tenuous at times. The introduction of research into this complex dynamic can potentially be disruptive, or at the very least, it can add an element of uncertainty into the relationship—a researcher who is literally eavesdropping on private classroom conversations. Finally, teaching and learning is an inherently (and necessarily) risky proposition: teachers take risks in their lessons by

crafting creative, unusual activities that may fly in the face of a conservative approach and may not even work; students take risks in their replies during classroom conversations and in their responses to written assignments. Educational research may inhibit (or provoke) such risk-taking behavior, and a researcher who conducts classroom observations or interviews must therefore be aware of the impact they may have in the classroom.

Issues inherent in the final category, respect for educational research, are closely tied to issues of authenticity in qualitative research (see above) in many ways. It also involves the demeanor of the educational researcher who must present a professional appearance, yet maintain a friendliness and approachability that encourages honesty and risk-taking. A well-reasoned research topic, well-considered interview questions (if applicable), a respect for the emotional investment of the members of the social system, a sympathetic understanding of the teacher-student dynamic, and an open-mindedness toward the educational process can all work to demonstrate a researcher's respect for educational research and the study participants.

Ethical considerations are addressed in this study, in part, through University requirements which demand that an ethics proforma document be submitted before a research project can begin. That form was submitted in April 2011 and approved in regards to this research project (see Appendix A). The ethics proforma form indicates the nature of the research as well as a description of its aims, principal research question, methodology, and participants and how they are selected. Additionally, each participant in the study, including teachers, students and their parents, and the school principal will be asked to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix B) which details the research that will be performed in the school, offering the opportunity for participants to withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time during the

study. Furthermore, the identities of all participants and their schools will be disguised throughout this thesis.

Ethical considerations are important aspects of educational research that must be foregrounded in the mind of the researcher as they can enhance or inhibit the quality of educational research. Beyond theoretical responses pertaining to the four ethical categories identified by Bassey (1999), each of the above ethical aspects of educational research will be explored more thoroughly in the context of the proposed case study structure.

Summary

This chapter has explored the philosophical basis for qualitative research, comparing it briefly with quantitative approaches, with respect to the research questions this thesis intends to answer. Following this was a discussion of relevant research into comparable research questions before presenting arguments for the proposed use of a case study approach. Issues of trustworthiness and authenticity in qualitative research were discussed, and finally, some ethical issues inherent in educational research were examined. The philosophical and ethical questions that have been raised and discussed in this chapter will be addressed and answered with respect to the specific case study structure being adopted.

The next chapter will explain the structure of the case study approach that will be taken to conduct this research. Preliminary selection procedures will be discussed, and each aspect of the case study composition will be examined and its purpose in the case explained. Participants in the study will be selected based on opportunity sampling of qualified high school English teachers in Connecticut. To be “qualified” means that a teacher uses a work of fantasy literature as defined in Chapter Three (“Fantasy Literature”) above, that the teacher attempts to teach students any or all of the skills

associated with the theory of critical literacy, and that the teacher is employed in a public high school.

Chapter Six: Case study composition

The major research question with which this thesis is concerned is, *To what extent can critical literacy skills be taught through the use of fantasy literature?* The thesis involves an examination of practice in selected Connecticut high school English classes which employ works of fantasy literature to teach skills associated with critical literacy. In order to ascertain the extent and effectiveness of teaching critical literacy skills through fantasy literature, a case study methodology has been proposed because it can provide a triangulation of data that is critical to a qualitative researcher. This chapter will primarily concern itself with outlining the elements of the case study and identifying the methods by which research subjects were obtained. A brief discussion of the selection of case study subjects will conclude the chapter.

Overview

The unit of analysis (*i.e.*, the case study) for this research will center on the classroom, particularly on the approaches individual teachers employ to engender critical literacy skills in students and the students' responses, and it will be bounded by the teaching of a particular literary text. This chapter is primarily intended to answer an important sub-question that concerns this thesis: *What are some of the factors within a classroom context that impact the successful teaching of critical literacy through fantasy literature?* The major components of the case study include the following:

- Teacher interviews
- Individual student interviews
- Observations of classroom lessons
- Analysis of student work
- Overview of the learning environment (*i.e.*, classroom, school, and town)

Each of these components will be discussed below. All interview questions are included in Appendix D, and consent forms which will be provided to all participants in the study—teachers, students, parents, and building principals—are included in Appendix B. Parents will be provided with a consent form which indicates that they may “opt out” of the study, in which case their child will be not be interviewed.

Teacher interviews

Three³⁰ semi-structured interviews with each teacher will be included in each case study. Overall, the interviews are designed to help illuminate the background, pedagogy, and personality of the teacher, to build as multi-dimensional a representation of the teacher as possible. In short, to paint a *portrait* of the teacher which is intended to provide a greater understanding of the personal factors within a classroom that impact the successful teaching of critical literacy skills. The impact of teachers on student achievement is well-documented (Prince, 2002), so any discussion of student achievement must therefore consider the teacher who is delivering the instruction. To this end, a *portrait methodology* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Bottery, et al., 2008; Bottery, et al., 2009) is being used to help gain a fuller perspective of the classroom teachers involved in the study, “to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3).

Using a portrait methodology, a researcher can help tell the story of the subject by “producing a written description of an individual dealing with the challenges that surround them” (Bottery, et al., 2009). According to Bottery, et al. (2009, p. 83), portraiture is “an interpretive exercise, which does not assert any fundamental beliefs in

³⁰ In two of the cases (Case B and Case C), Stage One and Two interviews were combined due to time restrictions in the teachers’ schedules. This did not impact the data.

an ability to penetrate to some objective reality” but instead shares “many of the techniques, standards, and goals of ethnography” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 13), and thus is appropriate to a qualitative analysis. Portraiture employs open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews to illustrate the perspective of an individual in a particular context, focusing on a specific moment in time while recognizing that any situation may be fully understood only in relation to past and future events. Portrait methodology attempts also to isolate the voice of the subject apart from that of the researcher in order to tell the “story” of the human experience within the context being studied (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) faithfully and with veracity. Thus, portrait methodology will provide the framework through which the story of the classroom is told, helping to illuminate some of the factors that impact the successful teaching of critical literacy skills and identifying salient features of the context of the learning experience, all of which can help define the extent to which those skills can be taught using fantasy literature.

Consistent with the recommendations outlined in Chapter Five regarding trustworthiness and authenticity in qualitative research, when teachers were initially contacted, the purpose of the research was explained, anonymity was assured at all stages, and subject-participants were promised the opportunity to review all transcribed interviews (all interviews and observations were audiotaped, with the permission of all subjects, to ensure accuracy) and other data that was gathered through them. All interview questions were provided to subjects ahead of time to eliminate “surprises”. These steps were taken to help develop a sense of trust between researcher and subject and to ensure accuracy in the data collected. Teachers were informed that they could choose to withdraw from the case study at any point in the process.

Stage One Interview

The Stage One teacher interview is intended in part to help establish trust between teacher and researcher, a necessary component considering the depth of analysis to be undertaken and the honesty the researcher hopes to encourage in the subject who, after all, is inviting the researcher—a stranger—to observe him or her at work in a somewhat-unpredictable environment. Interview questions during Stage One involve inquiries into the teacher's professional preparatory background as well as their current pedagogy, and they are intended to provide some historical context for the teacher's current situation. This interview is intended to last fifteen or twenty minutes.

The Stage One Interview questions include the following:

1. How many years have you been teaching? All at this school? Where did you go to college?
2. Why did you become a teacher?
3. How would you describe yourself and your approach to teaching?
4. With which grade(s) do you use works of fantasy?

The first question inquires into the teacher's experience as an educator. Presumably, more experience makes a given educator more effective in the classroom, though this may not necessarily be true due to a teacher being assigned new classes to teach, being new to a school, undergoing personal problems, experiencing ennui or being otherwise disaffected, a lack of attention to personal development and growth, or numerous other issues. These exceptional circumstances are uncommon enough that additional questions to address them specifically did not seem warranted. Through open-ended questioning, one or more of these factors would likely emerge, especially if the researcher is cognizant of the possibility.

The second question addresses the initial motivator for the teacher. Whether the teacher is motivated to help children, because of a love of literature, because of familial

expectations, because of the perceived fringe benefits of teaching (due to the work schedule), or whatever the case may be, the motivating force behind a teacher's desire to become an educator may be a significant factor in determining their commitment to the students and their drive to maximize learning.

The third question attempts to get at the heart of the teacher's pedagogical approach as well as help develop a fuller perspective of the teacher as a person. Pedagogy plays a significant role in the educational process, and it would certainly be a critical factor in determining the generalizability of this research. Whether the pedagogy reflected a teacher-centered vs. a student-centered approach and to what extent, for example, could have a significant impact on the interpretation of the data.

The final question in the Stage One Interview begins to uncover the student-subject demographic. Generally speaking, the minds of older students are more developed than those of their younger peers, and certainly older students have probably been exposed to more educational experiences, not to mention life experiences, than younger students. The ages of the students, whatever their individual backgrounds, could impact the results of the research.

The Stage Two interview questions are more extensive, and the exchange is intended to take approximately forty-five minutes. This set of questions involves three strands of inquiry: 1) the teacher's experiences, personal and professional, with fantasy literature; 2) the teacher's understanding of the term *critical literacy*, a foundational term in the study; and 3) a discussion of the literature unit the teacher will be implementing during the study.

Stage Two Interview

The Stage Two interview is divided into three strands, the first of which addresses fantasy literature, the second critical literacy, and the third the teacher's

pedagogy. The interview itself will progress smoothly (as opposed to separating the strands into distinct and recognizable divisions). Each of the strands will be discussed separately below. Strand one questions:

1. What are your favorite novels to teach?
2. What aspects of a novel do you look for when considering it as a classroom text?
3. How do you define fantasy literature?
4. Why do you use fantasy literature in your classroom?
5. What fantasy texts do you use, and why did you choose those in particular?
6. How do your students feel about fantasy literature?
7. Have you ever met with any resistance from administrators, parents, students, or other teachers for using fantasy literature in your classroom? If so, what objections have they raised?

The first question is intended to uncover a teacher's primary literary interest and to help the researcher understand those aspects of the novels that draw the teacher to use them as teaching tools. Teacher enthusiasm has long been considered an important aspect of student success in the classroom (Bettencourt, et al., 1983), and the development of the answer to this question may help uncover the level of enthusiasm the teacher brings to the classroom. Expected answers may include specific texts (*e.g.*, *The Great Gatsby* [Fitzgerald, 1925]), genres of texts (*e.g.*, science fiction, mystery, etc.), texts that embody certain features or categories of features (*e.g.*, books about children; books with strong female protagonists; books that deal with relationships, politics, or families; etc.), or any combination of the above. Since this research project is concerned with the fantasy genre, a teacher's enthusiasm in regards to fantasy is a significant characteristic of the teacher that may affect the outcome.

The second question attempts to gauge a teacher's pedagogical approach as well as what they consider critical features of a "teachable" text. Knowing the reasons a teacher selects particular texts for use in the classroom can provide insight into the teacher's understanding of literature in the large, into their perceptions of students, and into their approach to teaching. Gauging a teacher's understanding of literature is important to pursue since educational research suggests that teacher knowledge of the subject matter is strongly associated with teacher effectiveness in the classroom (Guyton & Farokhi, 1987). Therefore, a teacher with a poor knowledge of fantasy literature may be less effective at achieving positive learning outcomes than a teacher with greater knowledge of fantasy literature, thus limiting the extent to which critical literacy skills can be taught successfully. Understanding how a teacher perceives his or her students and how they approach teaching are important aspects of the classroom environment and can provide insight into who the teacher is and how they present themselves to their students. For example, knowing that a teacher freely selects texts without considering student interest or aptitude or who selects texts without thought or consideration of any kind, may suggest that the teacher lacks enthusiasm toward, or knowledge of, their subject which may affect the results of this study.

Teachers will also be asked about their definitions of fantasy literature, an important question since what the teacher may consider to be fantasy literature may be at variance with the definition included in this research study. Teacher's whose definition of fantasy differs wildly from that included in this thesis may risk not be included in the study. At the least, the teacher's answer to the question will likely impact the limitations of the study since the genre is difficult to define and practitioners' understandings of fantasy as a genre, as well as their choices in fantasy literature, may vary.

Question Four acts as a bridge question connecting Questions Two and Five. Question Two asks about salient features of teachable texts in general, and Question Five asks about the critical features of specific fantasy texts. Question Four bridges these questions by asking about the teachable features of fantasy texts in general. In this way, teachers move from discussing literature to fantasy to specific fantasy texts, narrowing the focus of the questions to enhance the comfort level of the teacher and encourage them to focus more specifically on clearly identifiable aspects of the novels they intend to use in the case study.

The next interview question also asks why the teacher uses particular fantasy texts in their classroom. This is similar to Question Two (above) and may be used to corroborate the earlier response as well as provide a broader picture of the teacher's pedagogy. Presumably, a teacher will have chosen a particular text for use in the classroom because it fulfills one or more of the criteria identified in Question Two, and this question is intended to delve more deeply into those reasons. Also, the question attempts to discover whether a teacher *has* specific reasons for using a particular text. For example, a teacher may be using a text simply because "it's in the curriculum" and they have no choice, or for some other similarly facile reason. The teacher's reasons for using a specific fantasy text will also yield insight into the aspect of literature they intend to examine with their students or the skills they intend to help their students develop and to what extent. Those reasons are important to discover since they will help provide limitations on the individual case. For example, a teacher who uses a fantasy text because of its illustration of heroism may not help their students develop critical literacy skills as fully as a teacher who chooses a fantasy text because it helps the students understand social disparities or gender inequities, aspects which are more closely aligned with, and addressed by, critical literacy theory.

Question Six is less about student perceptions of fantasy literature than about the *teacher's perceptions* of the interest of the students in fantasy literature. The teacher's responses to this question will be juxtaposed with those of the students in their individual interviews. While the results will not be definitive, they will likely provide insight into the accuracy of the teacher's understanding of his or her students and suggest the degree to which the teacher recognizes the students' appreciation of fantasy.

The final question in the first strand is intended to identify the reactions of other educational stakeholders in fantasy literature. The first six questions have dealt with the primary stakeholders: teacher and students. The perceptions of secondary stakeholders, who are also invested in the educational outcomes, is important to investigate insofar as they impact the classroom. That is, outside interviews with administrators, other teachers, students not enrolled in the class under study, and parents may yield additional insights, but those perceptions are not of critical importance because they may not impact the teaching of the literature. However, teachers who feel resistance—or who are prevented from teaching a book by a secondary stakeholder (*e.g.*, a member of the district's Board of Education)—may be less likely (or unable) to teach a particular fantasy novel, even though the teacher may feel it has merit in the classroom. Furthermore, such resistance or restrictions may also limit the scope of this study and is therefore an appropriate and necessary avenue of inquiry. For example, in an email correspondence, Danbury, Connecticut High School English Department Head Ian Strever noted that author J.K. Rowling “presents some religious conflicts for our district, although I would love to include it” in the curriculum (Fabrizi, 2010). Therefore, despite high student interest in the *Harry Potter* books, Rowling's books would not be used in the Danbury district due to objections on religious grounds.

The next strand of questions concerns the concept of critical literacy, a pedagogy that has been prevalent in public schools in the United States for at least forty years

(Freire, 1970, 1976) and the primary pedagogy explored by this study. The questions for this strand include the following:

1. What does the term *critical literacy* mean to you?
2. Describe your approach to teaching critical literacy skills with fantasy literature.
3. Is there any aspect of critical literacy that you emphasize when you use fantasy literature?
4. What are some of the strengths of using fantasy to teach critical literacy skills? Weaknesses?

Just as with the first strand of questions concerning fantasy literature, the first question in this strand is definitional, designed to establish the level of conceptual understanding the teacher has in regards to the term *critical literacy*. This is important because an imperfect understanding of the term may impact the results of the research, as a teacher who has only a cursory knowledge of the term will likely be less adept at developing those skills than those practitioners with a greater knowledge of the term. Less knowledgeable teachers may not be able to push the students as far in their skill-development, nor might they even understand the goals toward which they are driving students. Conversely, even though a teacher professes to know little about the term *critical literacy* itself, he or she may still have an intuitive understanding of the skills the term embodies and may be able to help students develop those skills with greater facility than teachers who profess greater knowledge. Thus, familiarity with, and knowledge of, the term *critical literacy* itself is not a prerequisite for a teacher to help students develop those skills. Still, probing the depths of a teacher's pedagogical knowledge will inform the results of the study, and it will also help paint a more three-dimensional picture of him or her as a teacher and ensure that teacher's portrait is more fully realized.

The second question of this strand connects the two central terms of this thesis: fantasy literature and critical literacy. The intention of this question is first to discern to what extent the teacher has considered their approach to helping students develop critical literacy skills through fantasy literature, and to what extent that approach is thoughtful and meaningful; and second to uncover more precisely their teaching methodology. The question is intentionally open-ended to allow teachers to interpret the question broadly and explore whatever avenue of thought they wish without being influenced by the researcher. The teacher's answer to this question may also provide insights that the researcher will find helpful during the classroom observations (*e.g.*, by helping the researcher know on which aspect of classroom instruction the teacher will focus). This question will also help bridge the gap between this theoretical strand of questions and the next, more practical strand.

Question Three is intended to help both the teacher and the researcher narrow the focus of the theoretical connection between critical literacy and fantasy literature. It also bridges the gap between questions two and four, overlapping each of them by addressing aspects common to both. Furthermore, the question serves to enrich the researcher's understanding of the teacher's knowledge of the applications of critical literacy skills through fantasy literature.

The final question of this strand asks the teacher to step back a bit from the narrowness of question three, looking at the broader picture of a critical literacy pedagogy from both a supportive and a critical perspective. A teacher's view of the weaknesses of teaching critical literacy skills through fantasy literature may help further refine the limitations of the study by examining relevant perspectives. It may also provide insights into what the teacher chooses to *do* by asking about what they choose *not* to do. Teacher perceptions are of central importance in this study, and if a teacher

perceives a weakness in the connection between critical literacy and fantasy literature, that perception is valuable and should be identified.

The third and final strand of the Stage Two teacher interview concerns the specific aspects of the classes under observation. As with the other strands, these questions help expand the researcher's view of the teacher as educational practitioner, provide some avenues of focus for the observations, and further refine some of the possible limitations of the study. The questions are as follows:

1. Tell me about the unit you are teaching/preparing to teach.
2. Do you anticipate any difficulties?
3. Tell me about the students. How do they approach literature? Fantasy?
4. Have you had any other experiences teaching fantasy literature that you think would be germane to my research?

Question One asks the teacher to provide an overview of the unit and is divided into three sub-questions: 1) What book will you be teaching, and have you taught it before?; 2) What aspect(s) of critical literacy will you focus on and why?; and 3) If you have taught this unit before, have you revised it, and how? The intent of these questions is to delve more deeply into the teacher's expectations for the unit, to uncover more precisely the educational intentions of the unit of study. Because the case study is bounded by the teaching of a unit of literature, a more thorough understanding of the unit, beginning with the literary text, is critical for a fuller interpretation of the data. Also, these questions will help to further refine the focus of the data-gathering in classroom observations, and will impact the limitations of the study. For example, a teacher may decide to focus on social class relations within a text, while at the same time recognizing that gender also helps define the novel, albeit in less significant ways. To conclude that gender issues cannot be developed through fantasy literature would be inappropriate and even irresponsible on the part of the researcher. Skill development

may simply be a matter of teacher's choice, not dictated by the material. These questions are intended to uncover those decisions that drive a teacher's choices.

A teacher may not require students to analyze every text to the fullest extent allowed by critical literacy theory—some scaffolding of skills is necessary and appropriate—since critical literacy embodies a wide variety of skills and addressing all of them with every text may be precluded due to time constraints. For a teacher's approach to be identified as embracing critical literacy, teachers must address any or all of the facets of reading skills identified in Chapter Two, including 1) examining the political and/or social forces embedded in a text; 2) identifying missing or marginalized voices; 3) exploring and/or problematizing issues addressed in the text; 4) articulating alternate understandings of a text (*i.e.*, disrupting the author's "intended" interpretation of the text); and 5) using the text reflectively to facilitate self-improvement and/or to promote social justice. These skills differentiate a critical literacy approach from a traditional approach (*i.e.*, analyzing the literary elements of a text, the psychological or motivational elements of characters, and articulating a thematic meaning and significance of the text) because critical literacy *begins* with a literary understanding of a text, then pushes students *further* in their understanding of the text's significance, contextualizing it more broadly and creating a more robust paradigm to understand the text; therefore, it embodies both a literary and a critical approach to reading.

Question Two asks the teacher to predict teaching challenges regarding the unit. The answer to this question can impact the limitations of the study as well as focus on particular problem areas the teacher foresees. To the extent that the teacher has taught the unit previously, these predictions can accurately identify particular areas of concern, or aspects of critical literacy skills that the teacher knows to avoid from past experience. Either way, the teacher's response to this question will likely illuminate their portrait as professionals.

The next question is contextual, inquiring into the academic focus of the students themselves—or at least the teacher’s perceptions of the students’ academic focus. Although a teacher’s perceptions of his or her students may be biased (or even inaccurate) and are necessarily subjective to a certain degree, it is those perceptions that will presumably drive the teacher’s approach to the students and the class, impacting the teacher’s decisions regarding selection of text and which aspect(s) of critical literacy to teach. Therefore, an understanding of how the teacher perceives his or her students is critical to developing a fuller understanding of who the teacher is and how they themselves approach that particular class.

The final question in the initial teacher interview is a “catch-all,” an open-ended question designed to solicit relevant background information that may have been missed during the prior interview questions. The question allows the teacher to provide whatever information he or she views as relevant or interesting, while also possibly directing the researcher to other pertinent avenues of research.

Stage Three Interview

The final interview stage for teachers involves questions that ask teachers to reflect on the unit goals and the students’ relative success in achieving them, and on their own behaviors in helping students learn. These are important questions to ask because after teaching a unit, teachers often reflect on the students’ acquisition of the most important learning objectives which may lead teachers to revise their teaching units to help prepare students more effectively in the future. Effective reflective practices have long been seen by researchers as critical elements that promote good teaching (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983; Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003). In addition, Freire’s (1970, 1976) concept of praxis involves a cycle of action and reflection, so reflective interview questions are aligned with critical literacy theory. Incorporating

these types of questions into the interview can also provide insight into the degree of reflection the teacher engages in and hence insight into the teacher's overall effectiveness and adherence to the Freirean concept of praxis, insight which could impact the conclusions of this study.

The first of these questions asks the broad question, "How did the unit go?" This open-ended question is designed to elicit a broad response that is directed by the teacher rather than focused by the researcher. This allows the researcher to identify those aspects of the unit that are foremost in the mind of the teacher, aspects that stand out in some way or are important to the teacher. Responses may range from comments about student performance, development of the unit, teacher behaviors, the text itself, the assessment(s) used, or any number of other elements. The critical feature of this question is the fact that teachers are able to frame their response with minimal influence by the question itself. Thus, the question yields two important answers which deal with 1) the teacher's reflections themselves and 2) the direction of focus for the reflections. The direction of focus for the teacher's response suggests a primary guiding principle for the teacher's classroom instruction. Teachers who focus on student outcomes and performances tend to achieve better results (*i.e.*, more effective learning) in their students than teachers who focus more on teacher behaviors or the text itself (Eaker, et al., 2002).

The next question—"Did you accomplish everything you set out to do?"—provides an opportunity for a more critical self-reflection, forcing the teacher to frame their comments on the unit's outcome in terms of their own behaviors. Their response provides insight into their views on student performance with respect to teacher behaviors, and may impact the results of the study. Additionally, their responses concerning student achievement can also be used to corroborate the analysis of the researcher, providing another perspective on the student data.

Question Three refines the response to the prior question, asking teachers, “Did anything go better/worse than you expected?” The question essentially asks teachers to consider specific aspects of their unit and the students’ responses to it, providing an opportunity for the teacher to note evidence and other details from the unit.

Question Four inquires into mid-unit changes the teacher may have chosen to make: “Did you make any changes in the middle of the unit/project?” This is important since it may impact the results obtained from the students, and it may suggest something about the teacher’s pedagogical practices. For example, if the teacher made significant changes in the middle of the unit, what were the reasons? Had the teacher not really understood what they were really looking for from the students? Had the teacher never taught the course before and estimated poorly the time required? Did the teacher spy an opportunity to enhance student understanding—a “teachable moment”—and try to capitalize upon it? The reasons for the changes are at least as important as the changes themselves: The changes may impact the results of the study, while the reasons for the changes provide insight into the teacher’s reflectiveness and pedagogy—both of which help provide the researcher with a fuller picture of the classroom experience (*i.e.*, the case study).

So far, each of these four questions has asked increasingly-narrow reflective questions, the development of which has required teachers to focus their responses and pursue avenues of reflection most interesting to them. The questions also focus on the past, asking teachers to consider the accumulated data from the unit. Question Five focuses on the future: “What would you do differently next time?” This question requires that teachers consider the accumulated data from the unit (*e.g.*, their observations of the progress of the students toward the unit objectives), filter their observations through the lens of their pedagogy, and produce an informed revision of their practices going forward. As with previous questions, the teacher’s revision may

impact both the interpretation of the data and the limitations of the study. Additionally, their comments may suggest possibilities for further study.

The final question in the set asks a meta-cognitive question: “Was there anything unexpected that arose from my research? Anything you realized about yourself or your own teaching that may have surprised you?” This question is as much about uncovering the degree of reflectivity possessed by the teacher as it is about suggesting limitations of the study as well as further avenues of research this study may point toward. The question is also asked because of pure curiosity: What was interesting or enlightening about the study? Does the teacher have further insights that might suggest tangential avenues of inquiry that had not been considered at the outset? How has this study helped or informed the teacher? The question helps the teacher validate their participation in the study by asking them to reflect on their own learning as a research subject.

Summary: Teacher interviews

Through these questions, the researcher can gain information about who the teacher is as a person and a professional, discover the teacher’s experiences with fantasy literature and critical literacy, and explore the ways the teacher intends to teach critical literacy skills through fantasy literature, thus providing a framework for the ensuing case study while at the same time helping to outline some of the possible limitations of the study.

Student interview questions

The primary purpose of these interviews is to understand the appeal of fantasy to students and appreciate their perspective of the genre more fully. Students are a critically important component of this research and the generators of much of the raw

data. Their perspective is a key element of the case study, as is their critical understanding of the texts. The interview questions are designed primarily to access the students' personal characteristics and feelings, aspects that are generally not addressed in the formal assessments of teachers. In this way, the study can begin to uncover the personalities behind the names, to link personal characteristics to the understandings portrayed in the cases. Analyses are not created in a vacuum, and students may offer additional insights into their understanding of a text if they are given a chance to respond to open-ended verbal questions posed by an outside party, rather than demonstrate their understanding by responding to the relatively closed, analytical questions posed by their teacher. These questions try to uncover those insights and understandings.

Within each case study, three or four students will be solicited to sit for an interview—expected to last approximately fifteen minutes—with the researcher. The teacher-subject will arrange a time and place for the interview that is acceptable to the student. In each school selected for the study, students were allowed to select two one-semester English courses from a variety of electives. All students are seniors in high school.

It is expected that participants in the interviews will self-select following a general solicitation by the teacher. Students will be informed that the interviews are intended to provide data that may be included in a doctoral dissertation studying the extent to which critical literacy skills can be developed in students through fantasy literature. Students will be guaranteed anonymity, and each student will be provided with a written transcript of the interview soon after its conclusion. Students will be invited to correct, delete, or modify any aspects of their responses to ensure accuracy. They will also be invited to provide additional insights or responses if they have another idea they wanted to include. Students will be informed that they may withdraw from

the study at any time without consequence. These steps will be taken to help develop a sense of trust between researcher and subject, and to ensure accuracy in the data collected. Interviews will take place in a semi-public area (*e.g.*, classroom, library, office, etc.) to ensure both the safety of the students and the privacy required of an interview. Whenever possible, other adults will be present. Students will be provided with all questions, in writing, ahead of time. The interview questions:

1. What is your favorite subject in school? Why do you like it?
2. Did you choose to take this course from among a variety of options, or were you assigned to this class? If you chose to take the class, why do you take it?
3. What kinds of books do you like to read? Why do you like them?
4. What is your opinion of fantasy books in general?
5. What is your opinion about the book you're reading in class right now?
6. What do you see as the most important themes of the novel?
7. How can reading this book help you in your life?
8. What have you learned from reading the book?
9. Do you feel any kind of personal connection to the book? In other words, does it speak to your life experiences?
10. Describe a person who would really enjoy this book. You might want to consider their personality, their background, and their interests.
11. Is there anything else you'd like to say about the topic?

This interview set is designed to begin in the student's "comfort zone" by asking opinion questions that the student should have little trouble answering. The questions gradually become more narrow, some requiring analysis of the text(s) read in class. As the questions continue, they become more open-ended once again. Each question contains the word "you" some place in the text which is intended to serve as a constant reminder to the student that the questions are about them, a strategy which will

hopefully mitigate the student's anxiety about the interview process and about any uncertainties they may feel regarding their understanding of the text(s) being studied. All students were given the interview questions ahead of time to help them prepare and to minimize their anxieties.

Question One begins the interview with an opinion question intended to put the student at ease. The question also serves to provide some background on the student by uncovering their academic interests. Their response may impact the conclusions and limitations of the study. For example, students who are primarily interested in literature may feel more motivated to develop their answers further, to look more deeply into the text, or to bring more insights and connections to their reading—all of which could impact the study. Conversely, students who describe themselves as disliking English in favor of the “hard” sciences, may be less inclined to engage with the texts on a deeper level. (This reasoning is behind the development of other questions in this interview set, most notably Questions Two through Five.)

Because most classes devoted to fantasy literature are elective courses, the second question is intended to uncover whether the student actually signed up for the course, or if they were merely enrolled into the class more or less randomly. This question, similar to the previous one, is intended to help the researcher uncover some of the student's possible motivations in taking the class. It also attempts to probe the student's reasons for taking the class if they did enroll in it. Such reasons may be germane to the case if, for example, a student enrolled in the course because they have had extensive experience with the major texts and can offer additional insights through their experiences in fantasy. Perhaps the student is trying to stretch their own interests by enrolling in a class in which they have no experiences. Either way, the student's reasoning and background are important. Question Three addresses similar preferences, though the question is more specific, targeting the student's personal literary

preferences instead of scholastic. Again, the “why” part of the question is a way to attempt to uncover possible limitations of the study.

Whereas the previous question addressed students’ literary interests in general, Question Four focuses the student’s attention to fantasy books in particular. The open-endedness of the question is intended to allow students to take the question in whatever direction they wished. They could discuss themes, characters, a book series, or any number of other aspects of fantasy texts. The question is intended in part to address student’s preferences toward fantasy, but also to gauge their level of familiarity with fantasy texts.

Question Five directs them toward the text they are reading in class in an attempt to ascertain their level of understanding of the text, since in their answer they will likely discuss some of the issues, characters, and/or plot elements present in the text. The extent to which they do this—and with what degree of accuracy—will help develop some of the limitations of the case as well as give the researcher a more accurate picture of the student as a reader.

Question Six, which concerns the book’s theme(s), is a fairly standard question asked by most English teachers, and the students will likely have some idea of the answer. It is, however, probably the most challenging of the questions in this sequence, as most students seem to have difficulty uncovering theme. The accuracy of the student’s answer is important largely in that it provides illumination about the student’s academic competence and familiarity with the text. The question will almost assuredly become easier as the student moves deeper into their study of the text, so responses later in a given unit will probably be more thorough, well-developed, and accurate than those given early in a unit.

The next three questions are similar and will be discussed as a group. The questions all deal with finding some feature(s) of a text that the student finds relevant to

their own life. Question Seven deals with finding a useful application of the lesson(s) of the text, Eight asks a broad question about what the student learned in general (*i.e.*, what application of the text's lesson has the student retained?), and Nine deals with personal connections the student may feel toward the text. All three questions deal with examining the text from a critical literacy standpoint, but they are ones that should be familiar to students in Connecticut, as making text-to-self connections is assessed on the Connecticut Mastery Test given to all Connecticut students in grade eight and the Connecticut Academic Performance Test which is given to all grade ten students in Connecticut.

There are three questions devoted to a similar aspect of text analysis because the questions are particularly interesting to explore due to a common feature of fantasy texts; that is, the general foreign-ness of the texts to the experiences of the students. A critique of fantasy texts is that they are silly, stupid, strange, or in some way irrelevant due to the foreign settings, unusual characters (*e.g.*, elves, faeries, trolls, goblins, wizards, etc.), or presence of magical spells or items. In asking students to make personal connections to the text, the study is trying to address this pervasive criticism of fantasy. The question is asked three different ways to ensure the students understand what is asked of them and that they have adequate opportunity to explore those personal connections thoroughly.

Question Ten is an invitation for students to identify personal characteristics they feel readers of fantasy texts might share. Their perspective can help to illuminate the conclusions of the study and offer possibilities for areas of further study. An interesting aspect linked to this question is that, while their perspectives of the general readership of fantasy are certainly interesting and relevant to the study, based on their answer to Question Five, the students may be helping to characterize themselves

through this question, which can help to more particularly identify the limitations of the study.

The final question is intended to allow the students to finish the interview on their own terms, adding whatever insights, thoughts, or perspectives they feel would be interesting or relevant to the study.

Observations of classroom lessons

In addition to interviews with the classroom teacher and several students, each case study will include observations of lessons. The purpose of these observations is to experience first-hand the interactions between teacher and students in a classroom, to identify teaching techniques and approaches, lines of questioning, activities, and assessments in a working educational context. In addition to the interviews, which provide important background information, the classroom observations offer an additional perspective from which to view the development of critical literacy skills to broaden the scope of the research inquiry. The data generated by this additional perspective is consistent with the recommendation of Bryman (2001) and Creswell and Clark (2007) that educational research provide thick descriptions to triangulate the data and arrive at more trustworthy conclusions. All classroom observations will be audio-recorded and then transcribed.

During the classroom observations, attention will be focused on observing how teachers help students develop the skill-objectives (*e.g.*, connecting a text to the real world, uncovering moral lessons in texts, identifying political underpinnings present in a text) through the types of student activities the teacher introduces. Types of activities may include any number of approaches, including whole-class discussions, group problem-solving, think-pair-share, student presentations, or traditional essay-writing.

Some of the key questions that will be explored through an analysis of the classroom observations include the following:

- What skill(s) is/are being developed in the lesson? In the larger unit of study?
- How does the teacher attempt to develop these skills (*i.e.*, what activities are introduced)?
- What text is being studied in class during the lesson?
- What evidence—in the form of student responses or student work—will be produced in the lesson?

The first aspect of the lesson being observed concerns the teacher's objectives. This is important because the primary research question with which this thesis is concerned is, *To what extent can critical literacy skills be taught through the use of fantasy literature?* The answer to this question suggests that both the *breadth* of skills being taught and the *depth* of development of each skill are important aspects to be considered. Teacher objectives can be determined by asking the teacher and can be further supported by examining the lesson focus and topic(s) of discussion and analysis. Knowing what the teacher's objectives are for both the lesson and the unit helps address the question of breadth. For example, the teacher's objectives might be to help students understand that each text is informed by a political agenda which may be explicit or implicit; that students must be aware of that political agenda; that once they are aware of it, students can question it critically; and finally that students can then examine the broader social and political implications of that underlying perspective and decide to take action in whatever way seems appropriate—or not. This objective defines the breadth of the teacher's goals: An understanding of one of the five aspects of critical literacy discussed in Chapter Two.

Furthermore, depth of study can also begin to be determined through an analysis of the extent to which the individual aspect of critical literacy is examined. To reference the example above, a teacher might only be interested in helping students understand the concept that a political agenda might be inherent in a text but go no farther toward a critically literate understanding of the broader implications.

An examination of a teacher's approach to develop the objective-skills helps address an important sub-question that also drives this thesis: *How are critical literacy skills successfully taught, and what does critical literacy look like in the classroom?* Because of the myriad approaches a teacher can take and the enormous variety of activities that can be incorporated into a lesson to achieve the objectives, this thesis does not attempt to specify *the* ways critical literacy skills are taught, but rather to identify *some* ways they can be taught. And, as suggested by the word "successfully" in the sub-question above, the extent to which those skills can be taught. This aspect of the classroom is important to examine since it will impact the conclusions and limitations of the study, and it can provide guidance for teachers in the form of suggested approaches and classroom models, depending on the relative success of the teacher. Thus, a discussion of the extent of the teacher's success in developing the particular critical skill(s), compared against the theoretical discussion of the relevant skills as explained in Chapter Two, helps to inform the results of the study and is relevant to the primary question of the thesis.

A crucial aspect of the unit being studied is the text itself. Does the text contain literary elements that can help students develop critical literacy skills? As shown in Chapter Four above, some fantasy texts can contain elements which can be employed to help students develop any number of critical literacy skills. However, this may not be the case for all fantasy texts. Any text used in a classroom provides teachers with richer opportunities to achieve certain objectives in their classrooms than other texts. As a

result, teachers use different texts to achieve different goals in their classroom. For example, a teacher desiring to illustrate the disaffection of teens in America might best be served by using J.D. Salinger's (1951) *The Catcher in the Rye* as a primary text. A unit that examines race relations in America might contain Harper Lee's (1960) novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. While both books can teach the reader about mid-Twentieth Century American social systems, the particular perspective provided by each novel offers unique opportunities to a teacher wishing to emphasize different aspects of those social systems. Hence, a study exploring the extent to which social systems can be analyzed would be limited by the text used because of the aspect emphasized by teachers: In the former case, the disaffection of teens, and in the latter, the impact of race on social systems. Therefore, the text under study in the classroom is important in that it suggests limitations and opportunities due to the nature of the text itself.

Teachers gauge student progress toward goals and objectives through an examination of student work, whether that work is produced orally (*e.g.*, through verbal responses to questions asked in class), visually (*e.g.*, through students presenting their work in a poster, collage, chart, Power Point, or dramatic play), or textually (*e.g.*, through an essay, short answer, exit slip, etc.). In this way, a teacher regularly assesses student performance and measures their relative success in achieving the objectives of the lesson, unit, or course. Therefore, this study will examine student-produced work in response to the observed lesson and the larger unit of study, measuring student success in developing critical literacy skills in much the same way as a classroom teacher. To do this, a framework and a rubric must be developed to measure the breadth and depth of skill development in students. These tools, which should be as independent of the type of evidence produced as possible, will be presented in greater detail in the section below.

Analysis of student work

Student work provides one of the foundational categories of evidence for this thesis. Student work will be defined, for purposes of this thesis, as any product created by a student in response to the requirements of a lesson or the expectations of the teacher, and can include verbal (*e.g.*, an answer to a direct or indirect question in class, a verbal presentation of ideas discussed in a small group of students, unsolicited comments that pertain to the class topic of conversation), visual (*e.g.*, responding to a question, illustrating an idea, or interpreting a text primarily through enacting), or textual (*e.g.*, any written text, such as an essay, a short-answer response, or an exit slip) responses. Such responses may be solicited directly by the teacher as, for example, when a teacher assigns an essay or asks a student a question in class, or the response may be unsolicited, as in a student's submission of an extra-credit project or in-class comment to a text.

Student work represents the evidence of the student's mastery of the lesson, unit, or course objectives and, in the case of this thesis, they are also the primary evidence that suggests a student's understanding of the concepts and applications of critical literacy. The data will be derived from the above sources: classroom observations, student interviews, visual observations, and written student work generated in response to the observed lessons and the larger unit or the course itself.

Each piece of evidence will be discussed in terms of what type of work is produced (*i.e.*, verbal, visual, or textual), what the students are asked to do on the assessment (*i.e.*, what is the task?), and what kind of evidence it provides (*i.e.*, what concept of critical literacy is being addressed?). Each assessment will be contextualized in the larger unit, including a discussion of the scope of the assignment (*i.e.*, formative assessment derived from a single lesson, summative assessment based on one or more lessons, cumulative assessment that represents a semester-long project, etc.). After the

assessment has been discussed, the evidence will be analyzed with respect to the primary research question: *To what extent can critical literacy skills be taught through the use of fantasy literature?* The analysis of the student work will be completed through the use of a rubric assessment and the application of a qualitative content analysis.

Rubric analysis

The open-endedness of the primary research question of this thesis presents some challenges, since the word “extent” suggests a continuum rather than discrete categories or a simple “yes” or “no” answer. While a degree of subjectivity may be inherent in such an assessment, the development of a rubric to ascertain the extent of the development of the skills can provide a sufficient level of objectivity so as to help ensure the study is *trustworthy* (as defined in Chapter Five) by addressing the aspects of *dependability* and *confirmability*. Dependability is addressed through the rubric in that well-trained individuals using the same rubric to assess the same student work should independently arrive at the same score, as long as the rubric is sufficiently specific and appropriate. Confirmability is addressed through the use of a set of objective criteria (*i.e.*, a rubric) since an assessor will be required to support their findings with specific evidence from the data sources and thus demonstrate the appropriateness of the rubric score.

The use of a rubric to measure open-ended questions is not without precedent. In a quasi-experimental study involving students in Grade 11 in two different schools, Hobbs and Frost (2003) attempted to measure and compare the acquisition of critical literacy skills through multiple media sources. They asked the students open-ended questions—for example, *How might different people interpret this message differently?* and *What is omitted from this message?*—which were then scored using a three-point

rubric. The students scores from each school were compared against each other to inform the results of the study. There are significant differences between the study investigated by Hobbs and Frost and the study investigated by this researcher: (1) The Hobbs and Frost study was quasi-experimental in nature; (2) the results were measured quantitatively; (3) the questions students responded to were known ahead of time and, in fact, were developed by the researchers in conjunction with the teachers of the student-subjects; and (4) the questions were small in scope and thus easier to measure.

However, two key comparative elements of their study provide guidance in the current study. First, the research question Hobbs and Frost asked dealt with measuring skills acquisition, the same as this thesis. Secondly, the skills measured by Hobbs and Frost were *critical literacy* skills. Both of these elements provide a strong enough connection to consider the use of a rubric to measure skills acquisition as appropriate in this case.

To determine the extent that such skills can be taught, the following four-level rubric has been developed to identify the critical literacy skill(s) a student's response to an assessment demonstrates (*i.e.*, breadth), and to measure the degree to which the concept(s) might be demonstrated (*i.e.*, depth). It must be noted that the goal of this rubric is not to quantify the students' critical literacy skills, but to provide a framework to help describe their manifestation qualitatively. Additionally, the word *text* refers to the text being studied which may be a written, oral, or visual representation.

Figure 2: Critical Literacy Assessment RubricLevel One: No evidence

Text details are inaccurate; student's position is undeveloped or grossly underdeveloped; no critical literacy aspect is addressed OR the student's exhibited understanding of the aspect is incorrect (as critical literacy is defined in Chapter Two)

Level Two: Minimal evidence

Text details are accurate; student's position is developed and supported with evidence, though the development may not be full and/or the evidence may not be appropriate or sufficient; a critical literacy aspect is addressed; an accurate understanding of the critical literacy aspect being addressed is conveyed explicitly or implicitly, though that understanding may be rudimentary; an analysis of the text is present but superficial and/or one-dimensional

Level Three: Significant evidence

Text details are accurate; student's position is well-developed and supported with sufficient, appropriate evidence; a critical literacy aspect is addressed; an accurate understanding of the critical literacy aspect being addressed is conveyed explicitly or implicitly; an analysis of the text is present and addresses more than one dimension of the critical literacy aspect OR the analysis is developed further by acknowledging and discussing complexities of the text in relation to the critical literacy aspect

Level Four: Exemplary evidence

Text details are accurate; student's position is fully developed and supported with appropriate and sufficient evidence; a critical literacy aspect is addressed; an accurate understanding of the critical literacy aspect being addressed is conveyed explicitly or implicitly; an analysis of the text is present and addresses more than one dimension of the critical literacy aspect OR the analysis is developed further by acknowledging and discussing complexities of the text in relation to the critical literacy aspect; the analysis addresses a larger context, such as society or human beings in general

This rubric was developed by me as a way to describe the manifestation of critical literacy skills in student work. It is an original composition derived from my understanding of critical literacy concepts and my expectations for literary analysis which are based upon my extensive experience assessing literary analyses crafted by students in a college-level literature class that I have taught for eighteen years. It is

common practice in Connecticut schools for teachers to develop rubrics to measure student achievement of skills and standards, and I have been crafting rubrics for nearly every assignment I have implemented throughout my eighteen-year career, including such assessments as poetry- and fiction-writing, literary analysis, essay composition, argumentative writing, speeches, debates, presentations, and other visual products (e.g., posters, games, collages, etc.) among others.

Each level of the rubric (i.e., Level One, Level Two, etc.) was intended to build upon the level prior, increasing in rigor and raising expectations for student achievement. The rubric was constructed in four levels because more precise differentiation in achievement was not necessary since the rubric was intended as a qualitative assessment of student achievement, not as a grading tool. Also, because the rubric was not developed in response to a specific assessment, the levels of achievement are worded in a general way, intended as they are to assess skill-acquisition instead of content-acquisition. The following paragraph will discuss the specific elements included within each level of the rubric, elements which identify the characteristics of the analysis required to achieve that level of the rubric. The discussion will not proceed vertically through the levels of the rubric, but horizontally within the highest level of achievement in the rubric (i.e., Level Four), intended as the elements are to identify and describe the target skills.

The first two elements assess the amount of detail employed in the student's analysis and the level of development and supporting evidence the student provides, and they are standard elements in virtually all my literary analysis rubrics. The third and fourth elements recognize whether the student addressed any aspect of critical literacy, whether their understanding was correct, and whether their analysis was driven by critical literacy theory, referring implicitly to the Key Questions of Critical Literacy (see Fig. 1) identified in Chapter Four. The fifth element attempts to assess to what extent

the student addressed critical literacy in their analysis, whether the student addresses multiple aspects, or whether one aspect is analyzed from multiple angles—both of which provide a more complex analysis of the topic. This element is intended to measure the extent of a student's understanding of the theory and application of critical literacy and is one of the most important and distinctive elements within the rubric. The final element—which appears only in the highest level of achievement on the rubric scale—necessitates that the student create practical meaning from their analysis, that the student recognizes the value of critical literacy analysis as being applicable to the real world instead of isolated as a purely academic study. This is important because one of the aspects of critical literacy that separates it from the traditional study of literature is its application to the world outside of an academic context. The majority of elements listed within the rubric level must be addressed by the student in order to award that level of achievement on the rubric scale.

The phrasing of the rubric was discussed with my immediate supervisor—another English teacher in my school—but no changes were recommended. The rubric itself was tested using literary analyses produced by sixteen of my literature students who, as seniors, were enrolled in a college-level literature class. The results were discussed with my supervisor after we had each made independent assessments of the student work, and as our results were nearly identically aligned, the rubric was deemed satisfactory.

Content analysis

In addition to an assessment of the student's work through the rubric, which does not take into account specific content that is discussed, a content analysis will be performed to illuminate the substance of a student's work. In other words, the rubric will provide an *assessment* of the ideas, and the content analysis will provide a

description of the ideas. This method will provide additional triangulation of the data, increasing the trustworthiness of the results.

Practical guidance and precedent for this analysis was provided by three studies done in the past fifty years. Squire (1964) studied the literary responses of fifty-two adolescents to four short stories. The students' responses were recorded and later coded, and a method of analysis was devised to categorize the responses and look for patterns that emerged. The study is significant to this thesis because of the open-endedness of the responses being explored—Squire does not identify a specific research question—and because of the development of a method of analyzing the data for patterns after the research has been completed, both of which are similar to the proposed method of content analysis in this thesis.

Galda (1982) examined the responses of three young girls to books selected by the researcher. The girls were interviewed before the texts were presented to them to determine their personal characteristics as readers, then after the students completed the reading, they were asked open-ended questions about the books. Similar to the Squire (1964) study, the data generated through the open-ended interviews “were studied until categories generated by the responses themselves emerged” (Galda, 1982, p. 4).

Finally, Wickens (2011) analyzed seventeen books, investigating manifestations of power and powerlessness as they relate to Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer (LGBTQ) themes. This study is particularly appropriate since the examination of power in texts is an important aspect of critical literacy. Wickens used what she termed “analytic triple-entry journals” to record the data from her analyses. Following the completion of her readings, Wickens analyzed the data by looking for broad, emerging patterns.

Each of the three studies identified above shares similarities with each other: All investigate readers' responses to literature (although, in the Wickens [2011] study, the

reader is the researcher); all gather the data first, then look for emerging patterns; and all are concerned with illuminating the content of the reactions of the readers. Because of the similar investigative interests shared among those three studies and this thesis, an analysis of the content of student work after the data has been gathered and coded will be adopted as an appropriate method of illuminating ideas that emerge.

Numerous types of content analysis procedures are used by researchers (Titscher, et al., 2000) depending upon the research question being asked. A method outlined by Mayring (1988 cited in Titscher, et al., 2000, pp. 63-64) provides a process to analyze the depth and breadth of the ideas present in the students' texts, a process which informs the method of analysis used in this thesis:

- (1) Identify and discuss the source material;
- (2) Discuss the context of the analysis;
- (3) Analyze the content; and
- (4) Interpret the student text.

Identify and discuss the source material

The source material is defined as the text chosen by the teacher (or student) that is read, viewed, or heard and is the source of discussion and analysis in the context of the classroom. The source material can be a novel, film, poem, play, or short story. Most often, the source material is selected by the teacher and includes a novel that is assigned for all students to read simultaneously and which provides the material for class discussion and analysis. The source material may be student-selected, depending upon the assignment; for example, a teacher may ask students to find a text to analyze independently. The genre of the source material will be identified, and the text will be summarized briefly in order to provide a context in which to place the students' responses.

Discuss the context of the analysis

The exigence of the students' analyses will be discussed, including the context of the lesson, unit, and assessment. This could include such elements as discussions of the nature of the assignment given to students or the question being asked in the classroom, the topic of discussion in class, the scope of the assignment, the focus of the unit itself, or any other element germane to a full understanding of the content of the response.

Analyze the content

This step of the process requires two phases: *quoted summary* and *explication*. During the *quoted summary* phase, student responses will be reproduced (or reduced, if one is particularly long, as in the case of longer written responses or extensive oral commentary) in such a way that the main ideas are retained. Material will be quoted as necessary. The units of analysis—the students' responses—will be defined as “the smallest combination of words which convey the sense of a single thought” (Squire, 1964, p. 17). Responses will be coded in terms of the aspect(s) of critical literacy addressed (see Chapter Four, Fig. 1: Key Questions of Critical Literacy) which will help determine the breadth of skills developed.

During the *explication* phase, the student responses will be explained and clarified in terms of their relation to the primary research topic of this thesis (*i.e.*, critical literacy). This phase will involve teasing out meaningful comments from elements that are less significant or downplayed, then interpreting those meaningful elements in terms of critical literacy skills development. Determining meaning will be accomplished through the use of several discourse analysis tools (Gee, 2011) that can be used to uncover what was said and meant, and to what breadth and depth. Three tools will be

employed: (1) the “Significance Building Tool,” which describes the application of grammatical constructions to *foreground* information (*i.e.*, establish information as meaningful and significant) by placing it in the main clause of a sentence while *backgrounding* less significant information through the use of subordinate clauses; (2) the “Connections Building Tool,” which involves examining a speaker’s use of grammar to connect or disconnect things, or to ignore connections between things, either explicitly or implicitly; and (3) the “Intertextuality Tool,” which examines how words and grammatical structures reference or allude to other texts (“text” is here being used in the broadest sense) to create or suggest significance. These tools, used implicitly throughout the analyses, will help provide guidance during the explication phase of analysis to aid interpretation.

Interpret the student text

The final step in this content analysis will be a determination of the depth of student responses in terms of the development of critical literacy skills. After the responses are explicated, they will be analyzed in the context of the key elements of critical literacy to determine the extent to which the student has developed critical literacy skills.

Overview of the school environment

The final aspect being explored in each case study is the larger learning context: the school environment itself and, to a lesser degree, the school community. A discussion of these elements provides an important context, since learning does not occur in a vacuum. Conclusions will not be suggested based on the school community, but because of the nature of the thesis, certain elements of the community such as racial diversity within the school, the size of the school, class size, standardized test scores,

and the fiscal profile of the community may all impact the results of the study and suggest limitations to its applicability. Therefore, the larger school environment will be described.

Selection of research subjects

There are 137 public high schools in Connecticut (CT SDE, 2011) employing approximately 1,700 English teachers. However, the research subjects of this thesis will be limited by the specificity of its research topics: critical literacy and fantasy literature, the latter being the likely aspect which might limit research opportunities, as indicated by a preliminary email survey request sent by me in October, 2010, and by research into the incidence of commonly-used books in American high schools (Applebee, 1989). The ten-question survey invitation email³¹ was sent to the individuals responsible for coordinating the activities and personnel of the school English departments³² who were asked to forward the survey invitation to members of their department after first responding to it themselves.

According to the results of that survey (to which sixty-two teachers responded), 94% indicated that they taught critical literacy skills in their classroom, while only 35% (or 22 teachers) indicated that they used fantasy literature in their classroom, and even fewer—24% of respondents (or 15 teachers)—indicated that they taught critical literacy skills through fantasy literature. Additionally, thirteen teachers initially indicated that they were amenable to being interviewed on this subject at a later date. Each of these teachers was contacted, but none were candidates for research, as they had no plans to use fantasy literature during the 2011-12 academic year—the time frame for the field research.

³¹ See Appendix C for list of survey questions

³² Although the titles of this position were, among others, “department chair,” “department leader,” “curriculum coordinator,” or “curriculum leader,” for purposes of this thesis, this individual will be referred to as “department chair.”

Following this process, the curriculums of each of the 137 school districts were examined for indications of courses that included fantasy literature. This was done because, as the results of the initial inquiry suggested, the incidental use of fantasy titles by teachers—even those who self-selected as willing research candidates—was found to be a poor indicator of the actual use of fantasy texts. Texts that are not written into the curriculum as required are not always used by teachers, nor are those choices often predictable or reliable. The written curriculums of only seven high schools in Connecticut included classes devoted to fantasy literature. Each of those schools was contacted to ascertain if and when the appropriate course was running during the 2011-12 academic year as well as the name of the teacher assigned to the course. Once this information was obtained, the principals, department chairs, and teachers within those schools were contacted to discuss the study and request the teacher's participation. Following this contact, three teachers agreed to participate in the study, two from suburban school districts and one from a rural district. The schools ranged in size from just over 500 students to over 2,100 students. None of the subjects taught in an urban district. The subjects of the study represented a mixture of student ability levels and learning environment.

Summary

This chapter outlined the composition of the case study used for this study. Each component of the case was examined and discussed, and a rationale was provided for each interview question and for the structure of the case study itself. A method of analysis was proposed to assess the depth and breadth of development of critical literacy skills through fantasy literature. The participants of the study were also briefly discussed. In the next chapter, each case will be discussed in greater detail, and the data

received through the interviews, observations, and student work will be analyzed with respect to the primary thesis question.

Chapter Seven: Results

The previous chapter was chiefly concerned with identifying and discussing the elements of the case study approach adopted to answer the primary research question, *To what extent can critical literacy skills be taught through the use of fantasy literature?* The case studies incorporated the philosophy of triangulation of data to promote the authenticity and trustworthiness of the results. The case studies took place at three separate schools during the fall of 2011. Interviewees at each school included one teacher and three students (four students were interviewed at one of the schools); two to four classroom observations were conducted at each school; students' work pertaining to the units of study was gathered and analyzed; and demographic information from each school was collected. The names of all individuals as well as the school and the larger community have been disguised to protect the anonymity of the participants.

This chapter is devoted to a discussion of each of those cases, presenting the gathered data and analyzing it in the context of the larger unit of study in the individual classrooms and in the context of the research question. Demographic data will also be provided to develop a fuller picture of each district. The data will be analyzed in terms of the research questions, and student work and discussions will be assessed against the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric (see Fig. 2) and analyzed qualitatively using the method of content analysis. Both methods are discussed in detail in Chapter Six. Following the analyses of the three cases, relevant interview responses of students will be discussed with respect to their experiences with fantasy literature.

Each case in this study will be presented separately below. The demographic information for each school and community in the study will be presented first to provide a context for each case. The background of each teacher will then be provided,

with relevant details emphasized and discussed. A discussion of the unit being studied in the class, as well as a course overview, will be presented next to provide more specific context for the student work and to identify specific skills the teacher intends to address throughout the course in general and the unit in particular. Following this will be a discussion and analysis of data drawn from the classroom observations and the written student work that was collected. Finally, data from student interviews will be discussed to illuminate the perspectives of students. Relevant data from interviews will be quoted, highlighted, and analyzed. Throughout the case studies, all quoted material that is derived from classroom observations, interviews, and written student work will be presented in italics.

Case Study A: Adams High School

School community and demographics

Adams High School is a medium-sized secondary school in Connecticut, serving students in grades nine through twelve. It is a suburban district located near the city of New Haven and on the Connecticut shoreline. Adams High School has a current population of approximately 900 students with a nearly equal male/female ratio. The student racial profile is predominantly Caucasian (82.5%) (CT SDE, 2011). Hispanic (10.1%), Asian American (3.8%), black (3.4%), and American Indian (0.1%) students comprise the remainder of the student body. In the graduating class of 2010, 87.7% of graduates attended a two- or four-year college, 3.6% attended a technical or preparatory school, and 8.7% went into the work force or military. The graduation rate was 98.6%, significantly higher than the state average of 91.3%.

The average class size in English is approximately 21.2 students, slightly higher than the state average of 19.7 students. The average number of years of experience in education attained by the teaching staff is 15.2, slightly higher than the state average of 14.0 years. Student performance on standardized tests was below state average, however. Students taking the SAT I in Critical Reading, the area of the SAT I that is most relevant to this research, scored an average of 462, while the state average was 503. (On the SAT I, a nationwide test, scores range from 200 to 800, with 500 being considered average.) The Adams High School score was considered to be in the third decile among Connecticut high schools. The other primary standardized test used for comparison is the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT). In the subject area tested by the CAPT that is most relevant to this research—Reading Across the Disciplines—Adams High School students also scored in the third decile among Connecticut high schools.

Teacher background: Sandra Jameson

The data from which this sketch was created were drawn from three interviews (during which only Miss Jameson and I were present) over a period of seven weeks. The interviews lasted various lengths of time—60 minutes, 50 minutes, and 35 minutes—and were conducted at various points during a unit of study which featured T.H. White's (1958) novel *The Once and Future King*. The first interview was conducted at the start of the unit of study, the second occurred a week later, after the unit began, and the final interview was conducted after the unit was completed. The quoted material presented here is derived from all three interviews and is organized thematically, not chronologically.

The Adams High School teacher-participant in this study is Sandra Jameson who has been teaching high school English for ten years. She teaches a one-semester twelfth grade course entitled, "In Another World: Fantasy Fiction From King Arthur to *Harry Potter*." She has taught the course once before and *developed the curriculum for it*. She is the only one who has taught the course. A well-educated professional, Miss Jameson is a graduate of Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU) where she earned her B.A. in English and her teaching certificate. Her Master's degree in English is from Wesleyan University, and her Sixth Year Degree in Educational Leadership is from SCSU.

Miss Jameson, an enthusiastic and energetic teacher, is an avid reader of fantasy literature, a fact which sometimes presents challenges to her in the classroom since she admits that she will sometimes *get a little upset when the kids either don't appreciate it or don't get it*. One way she tries to share her enthusiasm for fantasy with her students is by creating an online reading list of fantasy-based novels, enabling students to go online and peruse her selections and read her book reviews, demonstrating her commitment to the students and the subject.

She tries to push the students *to look beyond just the literal comprehension of the texts, to pick out those big world ideas that are addressed and that you don't always get in some of the fiction that we read in school. Fantasy, according to Miss Jameson, doesn't teach "lessons" about things; it addresses general issues that don't really have answers or lessons specifically and can be used to kind of get a dialogue going about those bigger topics that have been around for a very long time, like love, sacrifice, and trying to do the right thing. Fantasy, she says, has a little bit more of that grey area compared to a more traditional novel she might teach to the sophomores. With fantasy literature, there's a lot of meat in there that we can use to teach the kids, and if they can get into the fantasy stuff, and if they can understand the reading—that's part of the challenge for them, sometimes, just understanding, comprehending—they will be able to move into those bigger ideas.* An important aspect of critical literacy theory is the need for teachers to move beyond the text—from a literal understanding of a text, to a broader interpretation of it, and finally to the application in the larger world of the concepts learned through the text. Critical literacy involves grappling with difficult issues, challenging the text and by extension the author, a philosophy Miss Jameson purports to embrace.

When specifically asked about critical literacy, Miss Jameson identified two main threads of inquiry: 1) *Looking at literature...in a more in-depth manner, looking at the complexities of the text, thinking about the choices that an author makes in a critical way, and addressing some of those bigger issues about the themes of the novels;* and 2) *Applying those conversations and those issues to what's going on in the world: not just critiquing what's going on in the story, but also kind of applying that to the outside [world]and using that as a way to discuss issues between human beings as they are nowadays.* For example, Miss Jameson notes that, in the context of a discussion on the Arthurian text, the students were *talking about that idea of the wars that are going on in*

*the countries outside the U.S. and to some extent the wars that [the U.S.] is involved in, specifically that in order to keep peace we have to have soldiers die sometimes, as happens in *The Once and Future King*. Miss Jameson's conviction that fantasy is about issues, that she moves beyond a literal interpretation of fantasy text with students, and that she is committed to engaging the students in a dialogue about how the text speaks to bigger issues in the world all suggest that she embraces the core concepts of critical literacy in her pedagogy.*

According to her, Miss Jameson does not alter her teaching style whether she is teaching fantasy literature or traditional, realistic novels. *She tends to do a lot of group work in all her classes, although the questions that [she] asks are a little bit less on the comprehension side in the fantasy class; they're usually a little bit more about the bigger issues that are going on rather than just the basic understanding of the plot. In her students, Miss Jameson attempts to create people who are educated in various things, and thinking about the big issues that are in books are going to be what's going to follow them outside of school, suggesting a strong commitment to the concepts of critical literacy, specifically the emphasis on moving students beyond the text and applying the lessons of literature to the larger world.*

In teaching the skills of critical literacy, Miss Jameson tries to encourage the students toward more autonomous critical reading, to start *looking at the literature with a more critical eye and trying to pick out what are some of the issues they're seeing without me directing them*. She has found success in emphasizing two aspects of reading: discerning author's purpose, and finding connections between the reading and the students' own lives. When pressed about her approach to teaching critical literacy skills through fantasy literature, Miss Jameson explained that she looks toward the literature to guide her teaching approach, rather than applying the teaching of critical literacy skills as an artificial overlay: *I can't say that any [aspect of critical literacy]*

doesn't lend itself [to the teaching of fantasy literature], she notes, *because I'm working off what the book can do to begin with*. Her perspective suggests that, in her experience, Miss Jameson does not deny the validity of teaching a range of critical literacy skills through fantasy, but that, as with any piece of literature, some texts are simply more appropriate to teach certain skills than others, depending upon the content of the literature.

Course overview: "In Another World"

The course, "In Another World: Fantasy Fiction From King Arthur to *Harry Potter*," enjoyed significant enrollment during the first year it was introduced at Adams High School (*i.e.*, the 2010-11 school year), with approximately twenty-five students in the class. However, during the current 2011-12 school year, the enrollment dropped to nine students, a reduction Miss Jameson is unable to explain. The course itself is devoted to an exploration of *fantastical literature, identifying the elements that define it, the cultural influences it has, and its role in modern society*, and the readings include selections from White's (1958) *The Once and Future King*, de Saint-Exupéry's (1943) *The Little Prince*, Goldman's (1973) *The Princess Bride*, Carroll's (1865) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and Rowling's (1997) *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. At the conclusion of the course, students are required to complete a class project in which they are responsible for creating a fantasy story, including writing and illustrating the story itself, creating a map of the setting, developing accompanying songs, and recording a commercial for an audio book format of the story. The culminating project is intended as a vehicle for students to synthesize the elements of fantasy they had studied throughout the course, and then use the skills and knowledge they had gained to create something new.

The first unit of the course *is really just sort of a general summary of what is fable, what is legend, what is fairy tale, just to get them to know the terminology, what distinguishes the different types of fantasy literature.* Students read such texts as the fairy tale “Cinderella,” the folktale “Babe the Blue Ox,” and the myth of “Eros and Psyche,” learning about *some of the common plot elements and some of the stylistic choices* the authors make.

Following that, Miss Jameson introduces selections from White’s (1958) novel *The Once and Future King* which concerns the legend of King Arthur, a text Miss Jameson is committed to including in the curriculum since *there’s so much going on in the story that [students] can take away.* Additionally, Miss Jameson sees the Arthurian tale as *the beginning of fantasy literature* because *so many other books reference it and there’s so many allusions to it in the media that it’s important* for the students to read. *The Once and Future King*, she remarks, *is sort of the epitome of the fantasy story and was a good base for them to start with. It introduces them to those ideas of looking for conflicts that are in fantasy, even though it’s meant for children, so to speak.* The complexities in *The Once and Future King* that Miss Jameson references are something that appeals to her when she selects texts to use in her classroom, preferring books that are *a little bit more complex*, that have *a little bit more symbolism* and incorporate *lessons to take away.* The *books that are kind of multi-faceted* appeal most to her, providing students with an opportunity to find some aspect of the story that they can take away, whether it is the love story, the battles, or some other issue in the text.

After exposing the students to a foundational fantasy text, Miss Jameson moves on to *The Little Prince* (de Saint-Exupéry, 1943), a book that takes the students back to an earlier stage in their development as readers but simultaneously opens that world up and enlarges it. She admits that *this is a children’s book, technically, but there’s more to it than that and you can read it as an adult and take new things away from it*, that

being older and maybe having experienced love in some fashion, they can come at it now from a different angle.

Fantasy literature is not without its humorous element, a fact Miss Jameson underscores by including *The Princess Bride* (Goldman, 1973), a book that has numerous *underground references* and is *a lighter book to read—just a fun story*—and has ample amounts of humor due to its being a parody of the fantasy genre. *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865) is included as *another classic in fantasy literature that the [students] should read*. It is a book that is *so pervasive that they know the references to it already*, helping to stimulate their interest in the book due to their curiosity about it.

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (Rowling, 1997) completes the course, included in part because it has *just started a new wave of fantasy literature*, but mostly because Miss Jameson sees it as a culminating text, since Rowling *took so many elements from so many stories, and then combined them into one, and then stretched it out in that kind of epic way*. The concept of intertextuality is important as well since the character of Harry Potter himself is similar in many ways to Arthur: *this ordinary person can suddenly become King and become special or unique and is something that everybody wants to feel*, an aspect of the novel that contributes to its mass appeal.

In addition to the content, Miss Jameson chooses books for her class based on their adherence to the conventions of the fantasy genre. Miss Jameson's interpretation of what comprises "fantasy" as a genre is, she admits, *very, very broad*, including such genres of books as *science fiction, fairy tales, legends, fables, and magical realism*, genres among which literary critics and scholars draw finer distinctions. Judging from the list of genres she provided, Miss Jameson seems to define fantasy in the broadest sense as being "anti-mimetic" fiction; that is, fiction that does not attempt to reflect, reproduce, or imitate reality. Her definition makes sense in the context of her goals for the class: to help the students find meaning in books that, while not *terribly difficult*,

vocabulary-wise, are nonetheless compelling and multi-dimensional. She is not interested in fine distinctions within the genre, as long as the book has *some meat* and can generate student interest in the *imaginary stuff or magic* that pervades most of the texts. Therefore, while Miss Jameson chooses works that are diverse within the genre of fantasy, her overriding criteria concern substance and textual depth (*i.e.*, literary quality).

Despite the controversy regarding *Harry Potter* in some school districts (see Chapter Six above) and the religious concerns raised by some parents, Miss Jameson has not *had any arguments about the books that* are read in her class, noting that *there's no swearing in any of the books and very little blatant sexual references*. Miss Jameson was quick to point out, however, that the students in her class are seniors (seventeen or eighteen years of age) and that, owing to *the culture of the town* in which she teaches, *the parents are not necessarily probably aware of what [the students] are even reading*. Even when the parents were invited to share their feelings regarding books the students had selected for their independent project, *none of them addressed* any concerns with Miss Jameson, despite her awareness of potential problems that could result from her use of *Harry Potter* and the *religious aspect and the evilness of it and the anti-Christian stuff*.

The use of fantasy in school has numerous benefits to students, as Miss Jameson pointed out. Most notably is the fact that fantasy tends to open doors for discussion topics that other books may not address. For example, *The Once and Future King* explores *these ideas of trying to do what's right and it's still going wrong*, the idea that we think that if we *do the right thing it's all going to work out in the end and the bad guy is going to die*. *And sometimes it's very unclear who the bad guy is*, blurring the line between good and evil. *The Little Prince* also introduces the concept of *sacrificing things even if you really believe in them, that sometimes you are going to end up hurting*

someone even though you don't mean to, and that when you love something, it makes you responsible for it. Fantasy stories, Miss Jameson feels, are *not as clear cut to some extent as other fiction, even though they are aimed at children.* The ambiguity she notes in the novels' treatments of such complex topics as morality and ethics seems to invite student participation and enhance classroom conversations and, by extension, enrich the learning environment.

Additionally, the "otherworldly" element of fantasy provides an easier way for students to access those conversations and *to relate to [them] because it's another world so they can hopefully look at it from the outside* more easily than they can view a mimetic work which espouses, more or less, many of the values from a culture they themselves share. These beneficial aspects of fantasy help Miss Jameson to reach her ultimate goal for the students: *to begin thinking really more outside the box and thinking about those bigger issues that are going to be relevant when they are adults, and hopefully getting them writing and talking about them.* The idea about the "usefulness" of literature in the lives of the students that Miss Jameson noted here is significant because it addresses one of the primary goals of a critical literacy curriculum: To add value to literary study by emphasizing its application to the real world—despite any perceived lack of similarity between the setting of the novel and the students' world.

Although Miss Jameson has only nine students in her fantasy class—a small class by any standards, but particularly when compared to her school's average English class size of 21.2 students—, the ability levels of the students represent *a big range*, according to her, from students who are currently taking advanced, college-level courses and are enrolled in the fantasy class *for fun* to students *who are very low in ability, including one who, as an English language learner, still struggles with the language.* Miss Jameson notes that *last year it was the same thing*, as far as student ability levels was concerned. She admits that *this is one of the more do-able classes for*

the lower level kids, though, in terms of reading since it's children's books. The only one that is really terribly challenging is The Once and Future King, and this year, she has not required the students read the entire novel: they are reading key excerpts only while she fills in the plot holes orally.

Students enrolled in the course are largely self-selected: as seniors, they are allowed to choose two one-semester English courses from among twenty options. While the majority of the students who are in Miss Jameson's fantasy class chose to be there, *two of them did not opt to take it and were put in the class.* According to Miss Jameson, *one of them is very much not interested and hasn't done a single thing to be successful. The other one is concerned about doing well and seems to be trying to get into it.* The placement of these students in the class may be due to scheduling conflicts or other enrollment issues. This is significant because it may impact the students' investment in the class and, hence, their relative success.

To counter their reluctance to engage with the course content, Miss Jameson attempts to bring the students into the class by focusing more on the issues of the texts rather than the specific characters and situations the story deals with. She feels that this approach invites student participation because the students are *able to talk about the text when we talk about things that they can relate to.* The students *can answer those questions*, for example, that are similar to situations they have experienced, such as, *"Can you love two people at once, the way that Guenever does in the story?"* Text-dependent questions, she notes, excludes those "fringe" students who haven't read the text and *are kind of looking around, staring at the ceiling tiles because they have no answer.* The key element that Miss Jameson tries to exploit is the connection to the students' lives, especially concerning those students who are less predisposed toward fantasy. For students who tend to enjoy fantasy (or at least enjoy the particular text being studied in class) and have completed the homework, text-dependent questions and

issue-driven discussions are compelling. For students who do not seem to enjoy fantasy initially, the issue-driven conversations can still draw them into the class and hopefully act as a catalyst to convince them to engage with the novel. In this way, Miss Jameson is able, at least in part, to overcome the students' lack of investment in the course.

Regardless of the text Miss Jameson uses in class, the students must still complete the reading to prepare themselves for the class discussions, a task which daunts some of the struggling students. Even in her small class of nine, Miss Jameson notes a variety of types of students who approach fantasy differently. There are *the kids who are into fantasy, look forward to doing the reading, and are excited and nostalgic about it, and who remember reading that type of thing when they were young*. There are also the *Advanced Placement kids, and they approach work very formally*, though whether they enjoy the reading or are merely doing it to fulfill the class requirement, Miss Jameson expressed uncertainty. Still others approach the reading in *the same kind of...lazy way that they approach everything else in life, ...who float through class and...are okay with a [minimum passing grade of] 60*. Finally, Miss Jameson identifies the students who *struggle with reading and for whom the text is very hard*. Such a diversity of students presents Miss Jameson with a variety of challenges.

Lesson observation #1: *The Once and Future King* (White, 1958)

Miss Jameson was observed twice during this study. The first observed lesson occurred on 6 October 2011. When the lesson itself took place, the class was approximately three-quarters of the way through their study of King Arthur, according to Miss Jameson. The students had been assigned to read pages 375 through 391 in the text in preparation for the day's lesson.

At this point in the text, Arthur and Guenever had been married for some time, and Lancelot and Guenever had been flirting with each other in the presence of a more-

or-less oblivious King Arthur. The reading selection itself concerned Lancelot's return to Camelot after an encounter with Elaine with whom he had an affair. Upon Lancelot's return to Camelot, he and Guenever consummated their long-denied passion for each other. Soon after, Arthur left for France, giving Lancelot the responsibility for managing the kingdom while he was away. During the year that Arthur was gone, Lancelot and Guenever had an extended affair, but the sins he committed with Guenever and Elaine caused him to question his own ability as a knight. Immediately after Arthur's return to England, Elaine planned a visit to Camelot with Galahad, Lancelot's bastard child, intent on winning Lancelot's love. Elaine's proposed visit upset both Guenever and Lancelot; Arthur too was upset, but his problems stemmed from his unconscious suspicions of the affair Lancelot and Guenever were having, suspicions that he denied to himself.

Prior to the observation, the students had read the selection and participated in small group discussions in which they responded in writing to ten questions provided by Miss Jameson. The questions concerned the conflict in the text, the psychological impact on characters due to their actions, the values represented in the text, and the stylistic choices of the author. According to Miss Jameson, the Essential Questions which directed the questions on the handout were, "What conflicts are present in the legend of King Arthur?" and "How do conflicts presented in the legend relate to modern readers?" The first question largely involved recalling plot elements and demonstrating an understanding of the storyline. The second question required that students apply the information to a different but familiar milieu: their own lives. (Essential Questions are the conceptual avenues of inquiry that undergird a question, activity, lesson, unit, or course of study.) One key critical literacy focus of the questions concerned self-reflection since four of the ten questions, either wholly or in part, required students to apply the situation in the text to their own lives or to evaluate the actions of the

characters in terms of a modern sensibility. Another key aspect of critical literacy, addressed in seven of the ten questions, concerned an understanding of the themes and issues being developed in the novel—an important aspect of traditional literary study and a building block of critical literacy. In general, Miss Jameson organized the class by asking students to respond verbally to the questions on the handout, encouraging them to develop their answers or to create more connections and interpretations of the text. The primary emphasis throughout the lesson was on the creation of connections between the students' lives and the text.

The observed lesson incorporated a guided discussion to explore the students' responses to the ten questions they had answered the previous day. The evidence analyzed was the students' verbal development of their written answers. (The written responses were not available for analysis.) Seven of the nine students enrolled in the class were present during the lesson which lasted approximately forty-five minutes. Students sat in desks arranged in a circle to facilitate conversation, as noted by Miss Jameson.

One of the important themes that emerged from the lesson was an emphasis on students applying the lessons of the text to their own lives and reflecting on the characters' actions in terms of modern society. One of the questions Miss Jameson asked the students in regards to the text concerned a "seventh sense"—defined by the author as a "knowledge of the world"—that the author suggested develop in people as they age. Miss Jameson clarified what was meant by the term, first by questioning the students, then by reading an extended portion of the text when the students demonstrated a misunderstanding of the term. Miss Jameson then pushed the students to apply the concept to their lives, mentioning *Oprah*, a popular television talk show, then asking the students directly about their own lives and what happens as they age:

MISS JAMESON

As you get older, what starts to happen?

LINDSEY

You don't care [about your appearance]?

MISS JAMESON

You don't care as much. Why?

DENISE

Because you've experienced it. Like, it's not you anymore.

MISS JAMESON

Okay, it's not you anymore. So there's that experience with wisdom that you've kind of gained. What else do you start to realize?

DENISE

It's not how people look, it's their insides that matter.

MISS JAMESON

Good, you start to learn about that the inner person is more important. Were you going to say something, Lindsey?

LINDSEY

You become more stable and accept yourself and care less about other people accepting you.

Through this interaction, the rudiments of self-reflection are apparent, as students began to see larger issues in the text and how those issues apply to their own lives. The two students, Denise and Lindsey, built upon each other's ideas, ultimately coming to an insight about human nature. Their response, as applied to the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric, exhibited *minimal evidence* of critical literacy skills because their answers, while clear, needed development and support from the text. Also, while somewhat insightful, there was a lack of introspection on the part of the students: They created the insight but did not apply it to themselves. It is important to note that, in helping students connect the text to their own lives—an important aspect of her teaching that Miss Jameson noted in an interview—Miss Jameson created a connection to the popular television show *Oprah*, modeling the kind of text-to-world connections that she wanted her students to develop.

Later in the lesson, the students provided examples of real-world reflections of the love-hate aspect of the relationship that Lancelot and Guenever seemed to share in the text, noting couples like Sammi and Ronnie from the reality television show “Jersey Shore,” and the musical performers Rihanna and Chris Brown. Miss Jameson followed up their observations by asking the students about abusive relationships:

MISS JAMESON

What kind of fear do you think there is in that kind of relationship?

JACLYN

Like an abusive relationship?

MISS JAMESON

In an abusive, or even in Guenever and Lancelot’s case.

JACLYN

Well, I guess. But I think in an abusive relationship, there’s definitely fear and hatred of them hurting you, but there’s also an emotional fear.

MISS JAMESON

Good. What’s the emotional fear, then?

JACLYN

That you’re going to be alone.

Jaelyn’s response followed Miss Jameson’s prompt for text-to-world connections and an exploration of the issues in the novel, providing a compelling insight into human nature, that abusive relationships incite fear that one’s partner will hurt them, but that the fear of being alone can be sufficient to overcome any such fears one might have: the emotional pain outweighs the physical. Recognition of this insight is a first step toward dealing with it in one’s life. However, her comments lack the development or support that would suggest more than *minimal evidence* of critical literacy skills, according to the rubric.

A final example from further in the lesson illustrates additional insights and a recognition of complexities. At this point in the lesson, Miss Jameson directed the class to examine Lancelot's internal struggles:

MISS JAMESON

What other conflicts is he struggling with?

DENISE

Religion.

MISS JAMESON

Okay, in what way?

DENISE

He loves [Guenever], but he is going against his beliefs.

MISS JAMESON

Good. Okay, so it's his conflict of him versus, well, really is it Guenever he's conflicting with or his beliefs?

DENISE

His beliefs.

MISS JAMESON

His beliefs. All right, again, that Christian value, that chivalric value which we've talked about. What else?

AMANDA

Maybe to like gain back her trust because maybe he feels guilty about hurting her, and now he knows that he has to find a way to maintain the relationship they have.

...

LINDSEY

I think he also has conflicts with Elaine and everything that happened with that about how there's a baby and he's not going to be part of everything.

Here there was additional development in the students' answers as they indirectly referenced the text for support as they made connections. Still, their answers could not stand alone because they lacked full development. While the students' responses suggested a clear understanding of some of the complexities of the issues and themes of

the text (e.g., both the internal and external conflicts Lancelot faces and the complication of the situation introduced by the baby) as well as a recognition of Christianity being a dominant cultural discourse represented strongly in the text through Lancelot—both important aspects of critical literacy—the insufficient development of the students' verbal responses suggested *minimal evidence* of critical literacy.

Throughout this lesson, the students showed an understanding of the details of the text by referencing it directly or indirectly and developed insights that suggested an understanding of two aspects of critical literacy, including a recognition of a) some of the most important issues and themes in the text and their complexities, and b) some of the ways the text connected to their own lives. However, because of the lack of full development of their responses, including an application of the text-to-self connections through self-reflection, the students' responses exhibited only *minimal evidence* of critical literacy skills.

Lesson observation #2: *The Once and Future King* (White, 1958)

The observed lesson took place on 12 October 2011. When the lesson itself took place, the class had nearly completed their study of King Arthur, according to Miss Jameson. The students had been assigned to read pages 628 through 639, the final chapter of the novel, in preparation for the day's lesson.

At this point in the novel, Arthur was preparing himself for the next day's battle against Mordred, a battle he anticipated would mark the end of his reign. He spent the duration of the chapter reflecting on his kingship, ruminating about war, and in metacognition. He mused on his failings and his goals as king, and finally commissioned a young page—Thomas Malory (whom he knights)—to keep his story and his idea alive. The novel ended as King Arthur readied himself to face the cannon of his enemy.

Prior to the observation, the students had read the selection and participated in small group discussions in which they responded in writing to three questions provided by Miss Jameson, all of which involved a response to a quote from the text. The questions concerned morality and human nature. According to Miss Jameson, the Essential Question which informed the quotations on the handout was, “What is the appeal of the legend of King Arthur to modern society, and how does it influence the culture and vice versa?” One key critical literacy focus of the quotes concerned self-reflection since each of the questions dealt in some way with morality, asking the students to apply the concepts embedded in the quotes to their own lives and to society. Miss Jameson organized the class by asking students to respond verbally to the questions on the handout, in order, encouraging them to develop their answers or to create more connections and interpretations of the text. The primary emphasis throughout the lesson was on the creation of connections between the students’ lives and the text.

The observed lesson incorporated a guided discussion to explore the students’ responses to the quotes from the previous day. The evidence analyzed were the students’ verbal development of their written answers. (The written responses were not available for analysis.) All nine students enrolled in the class were present during the lesson which lasted approximately forty-five minutes. Students sat in desks arranged in a circle to facilitate conversation, as noted by Miss Jameson.

The first quote the students responded to was, “But the whole structure depended on the first premise: that man was decent” (White, 1958, p. 628). It was a purely philosophical question with no right or wrong answer, and the students engaged with the question readily, though with little connection to the actual novel:

AMANDA

I had [written about] how man has perspective, that they don't look at things from just one way. So that helps them to be decent.

MISS JAMESON

What do you mean, 'they don't look at things from just one way'?

AMANDA

You can put yourself in someone else's shoes, and you're able to not judge them as much.

MISS JAMESON

Okay, what do you call that, if you can put yourself in someone else's shoes and not judge them?

LINDSEY

Empathetic?

MISS JAMESON

Yeah, human beings have empathy, in general, towards people. What else?

LINDSEY

I wrote man *can* be decent, but that's not always the case.

MISS JAMESON

Okay, so you're kind of taking a middle ground there. All right. Go ahead. Why?

LINDSEY

Well, would we consider people in jail decent, people that kill people decent? I don't think so.

MISS JAMESON

Good point. All right. Anybody—

RACHEL

Many men have struggled with decency. There's all sorts of consciences inside of us, but in some people not as much as in others.

Through these observations, the students struggled with the idea of human nature. They built off each other's ideas to develop what seems to be a conclusion that a common "human" nature is a myth and that each individual possesses his or her own nature or way of behaving. The students tended not to employ examples to support their argument, except in a vague allusion to "people in jail" which did little more than simply illustrate the student's idea. In contrast, the students began to introduce

additional complexities into the discussion, especially with their idea that man has perspective and with the overly-general idea that criminals are, by society's definition, not "decent" people which supports the proposition that there is no "human" nature, a point furthered by the final comment by Rachel in the excerpt. Although this example suggests *minimal evidence* of critical literacy skills, it does provide a foundation for future discussions and implies the possibility of deeper, more multi-dimensional conversations as evidenced by the way the students grappled with difficult, complex, philosophical concepts introduced by a fantasy text.

Later in the conversation, the students further qualified their ideas when Miss Jameson connected the discussion back to King Arthur, asking students to reconcile the idea of decency with the idea of protecting people from a truth that can be harmful:

AMANDA

Because as long as you're telling the truth most of the time, and the only times you lie are for the better of the people. Say our president knew our world was going to end in three days. They're not going to say anything because they're just going to cause mass chaos, so it's better for us if they don't. But if they're keeping a secret that's going to harm everyone, then they're not a decent person.

MISS JAMESON

Okay. So decency can be circumstantial?

AMANDA

Yeah.

...

JACLYN

I put that everyone starts out decent, but as you grow older and experience the world, you become corrupted. It happens because of experience. The people that are decent in this world, there are not a lot of them.

MISS JAMESON

Do you think that people can be both? Can you be decent and indecent also? Can you be both at the same time?

LINDSEY

Not at the same time.

MISS JAMESON

So we all have it inside us, the possibility to go one way or the other. So I'm just thinking—go ahead, Zachary, what were you going to say?

ZACHARY

You know, there's Robin Hood, who steals from the rich and gives to the poor. He's still stealing, but he's giving to the poor.

While the students did not connect their responses back to the text, the original question of man's basic decency originated with the text itself. The students' answers were fully developed with appropriate evidence and examples (though none from the text itself), and they demonstrated a clear engagement with the concepts generated within the text. Through their discussion, the students problematized the issue in the text, refusing to accept not only White's dichotomy of man's basic decency versus his indecency, but White's premise that there in fact *is* such a thing as human nature, though their questioning of this concept is implicit in the discussion of the variations in human behavior. The latter insight suggests that the students are engaging in *disrupting the commonplace* by refusing to accept the author's theme—or even his premise, in this case—thus demonstrating *significant evidence*³³ of critical literacy skills.

Further in the lesson, the students moved back and forth between the text and their society as they responded to the following quote: “Was it the wicked leaders who led innocent populations to slaughter, or was it wicked populations who chose leaders after their own hearts?” (White, 1958, p. 630).

DENISE

I think wicked populations choose leaders.

MISS JAMESON

You think so? All right, why do you say that, Denise, and then Rachel can add on.

³³ Initially, this analysis was given a rating of *exemplary* on the Rubric Scale, but following a discussion with the auditor, in which it was noted that the students' comments were overly-broad and general, a rating of *satisfactory* was agreed upon.

DENISE

This is not an extreme situation, but I said that one person can't force other people against their beliefs. There are examples in history, like Hitler or something like that, but I don't think personally that one person has it in their head that they're going to corrupt a whole population just because they want to. So I think it's the populations that pick the leaders. I don't think that one of them can just corrupt a whole population.

MISS JAMESON

Okay, good. Rachel, what did you say?

RACHEL

We're the ones who choose the leaders. Even the presidential candidates, we're choosing who we want to go there, honestly. They're the ones out there, but we're the ones ultimately making the decisions. We're choosing who we want to have representing us, because we expect them to do things on our behalf.

MISS JAMESON

So especially in a democratic society where we're electing somebody. Okay.

JACLYN

Sometimes you don't have any choices, like in a monarchy, so I think it really depends on how your government runs. In Arthur's case, wasn't he supposed to be king all along?

MISS JAMESON

Yes.

JACLYN

So they really didn't have a choice there. They didn't pick him. So it depends on where you are.

In this exchange, the students worked together to build knowledge with minimum prompting from the teacher who merely facilitated the conversation. They provided evidence that was specific (*i.e.*, Hitler, the U. S. election system, and monarchies), and they linked their ideas back to the text, moving from a discussion of a democratic republican system of government to the monarchy of King Arthur as illustrated in the text. The students took on the responsibility to develop each other's answers, qualifying and refining the ideas being presented in relation to both the text and the real world in

response to the teacher's original line of questioning, thus demonstrating *significant evidence* of critical literacy skills.

Toward the end of the lesson, the students responded to a quote from the text, an idea that King Arthur considered as he regarded the consequences of his past actions: "Actions of any sort in one generation might have incalculable consequences in another, so that merely to sneeze was a pebble thrown into a pond, whose circles might lap the furthest shores. It seemed as if the only hope was not to act at all, to draw no swords for anything, to hold oneself still, like a pebble not thrown. But that would be hateful" (White, 1958, p. 631).

MISS JAMESON

What do you guys think? About any part of that?

JOHN

Everything he does has consequences?

MISS JAMESON

Good. Keep going.

JOHN

Every generation affects the next one in what you do. But when he says, "to draw no swords for anything, to hold oneself still," like just not do anything or make anything better would just be hateful because you're not trying at all to do anything any better.

MISS JAMESON

That's a good point, John. Good. Let's finish our interpretation of the quote. Yeah, that idea of everything that has come before us has affected where we are now. Can you guys think of other things that you can connect that to?

DENISE

Maybe like when my grandmother says, "Oh, that won't affect me; it'll affect you." Like a government thing, like jobs and stuff like that, so that could be one. Also, their mistakes in their generation will affect me.

MISS JAMESON

True. What else? Personal or outside, whichever you'd like to go with.

JACLYN

It's like fear of something stopping you, like in [King Arthur's] case, he was afraid of the consequences that would happen, like maybe we

shouldn't fight, but you can't let that stop you because then you wouldn't make any progress in the world.

In this exchange, the students identified some of the issues in the text—inaction vs. action, fear, consequences of one's actions—but developed their positions minimally on the issues, and none were problematized in meaningful ways. The discussion merely confirms what the text states explicitly: it does not resist the text or provide alternatives. They explained their ideas, providing a quote from the text and an example from real life, but those positions were not extended or developed further. The students made a connection to their lives, showing the relevance of the text, but the connection was limited to a personal relationship, and no text-to-text connections were created. While Jaclyn noted an important lesson the text teaches, she did not apply that lesson in a significant, self-reflective way. Therefore, *minimal evidence* of critical literacy skills was demonstrated in this excerpt.

Student essay analyses of *The Once and Future King* (White, 1958)

As a culminating activity for their work with *The Once and Future King*, students were required to write an essay responding to one of three questions:

1. After reading the legends of King Arthur, what conflicts run throughout the legend and how do these conflicts contribute to the appeal of the legend to a modern reader?
2. After reading sections of T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, how do White's writing style and plot choices (in other words, the way it is written and what he chooses to include in the story itself) contribute to the appeal of the legend to a modern reader?
3. How do the values (of chivalry, courtly love, etc.) presented in the legend of Arthur differ from or match the values of today's society?

The resulting essays were expected to be between three and five pages in length (expectations were modified for students with identified needs). Of the nine students in class, only six submitted essays: Three essays responded to the first question on

conflicts, one responded to the second question on style, and two responded to the third question on values.

Miss Jameson's essay question regarding conflicts was unlikely to elicit significant evidence of critical literacy skills since the question did not challenge students to address any of the five aspects of critical literacy. It is of course possible that the students might delve more deeply into the question or provide additional, unexpected insights into the topic, especially as regards the application of the story to modern society. The second question regarding style and plot choices was similarly unlikely to elicit significant critical literacy skills on the parts of the students since it seemed firmly rooted in a text analysis. However, the second part of the question asked students to apply the author's choices to the interests of people in modern society. This would seem to suggest that students must articulate those appealing elements and discuss why they affect modern readers as they do. Finally, the third question seemed most promising, addressing as it does an important aspect of critical literacy, namely the identification and discussion of the *dominant cultural discourse* represented in the text (e.g., chivalry and courtly love) and applying those values to modern readers. In summary, the first two questions addressed elements of the text predominantly but moved beyond the text to its real world application, while the third question focused the students on an explicit element of critical literacy for them to analyze.

Discussion of student essays

The essays varied in quality, as one would expect, ranging from *no evidence* of critical literacy skills to *significant evidence*. Two essays stood out—one that addressed the question of conflict and another that addressed values represented in the text—as particularly effective.

The first essay—written by Lindsey—suggested *significant evidence* of critical literacy skills. Her essay addressed conflicts in the text (*i.e.*, essay question one) and began with a strong thesis that the conflict appeals to modern readers *because they reflect accurately upon unhealthy relationships many couples get trapped in within today's society*. She developed her ideas about some of the issues the text explored, including confidence, self-control, and trust, discussing the ideas in the novel using appropriate quotes and examples. Her connections to modern society were insightful and compelling. In talking about the loss of self-control felt by lovers, Lindsey wrote,

Gwen struggles eternally because she is torn between her husband and her hero. This is appealing to modern day readers because people are unable to control their feelings as well as control whom they fall in love with, both now and then. While lusting for Lancelot, Guenever knew in her heart she was better off with Arthur because he truly cared for her and was able to provide for her. Regardless of this, everyone knows the heart doesn't always choose wisely.

Though she did not provide support for her assertion about this lack of control over whom we love, her explanation was thorough enough to demonstrate an understanding of the concept of self-control and how the idea is broader than the context of the novel, a line of thinking that began to explore the complexities of issues present.

Lindsey's discussion of jealousy was illuminating as well. She noted that because Lancelot had kept Elaine a secret, Guenever now begins to question his loyalty to her. People of all ages, teenagers and adults alike, conjure up conflicts because of lack of trust. It usually happens if they feel they have been wronged in the past...[It is difficult] for couples to move forward after one of them experiences a betrayal from the other...Jealousy makes the heart grow fonder (sic) due to fear of losing loved ones.

She provided analysis of the characters from the novel, connecting their actions explicitly to the modern world, though admittedly without modern-day examples to support her assertion.

Interestingly, each of her ideas about human behavior was connected to a cause: Lack of self-confidence, she posited, can *prevent someone from taking action*; a loss of self-control can be exacerbated when a person *feels as if their lover is above them (i.e., better in some way)*; with this loss of self-control and the accompanying feelings of inferiority comes jealousy, and *with jealousy comes lack of trust*. Insights into this interconnectedness suggested a recognition on the part of the student of the multidimensionality of human interactions and a refusal to simplify the text as a simple love triangle. Her analysis of the characters in the story indicated that she saw the root causes of friction in relationships and that she recognized the complexity of the characteristics that caused the undesirable behaviors. Seeing such complexities in the text was evidence of *problematizing* the conflict—an important aspect of critical literacy. Because Lindsey was able to recognize a multiplicity of influences on the characters which led her to make compelling observations about real-world behaviors after reading a fantasy novel, she exhibited *significant evidence* of critical literacy skills.

The second essay—written by John—analyzed the values represented in the text. John began his essay with an observation on the relevance of fantasy texts in general and the Arthurian tale in particular, noting that a modern reader *would think that the values displayed in the epic...have nothing to do with the world we live in today*. The examples he provided were typical for fantasy novels: *knights saving princesses, a wizard who lives backwards in time, and a king who is crowned when he pulls a sword from a stone*. Despite the apparent incompatibility of the surface features of the text to modern society, John noted that the underlying values represented in King Arthur—courage, faith, and loyalty—are still present in our world.

Each of John's analyses of the three main character traits he identified was developed thoroughly with examples and quotes drawn from the text as well as an illustration of that trait in modern society. For example, he identified Lancelot, *a devout*

Christian, as demonstrating faith in God. In connecting this trait to people in modern society, John took a qualified position: *The value of faith might seem that it is not as present as it was during the legend of King Arthur. Nowadays people don't rely on a faith in a higher power as much as they did back when but they do have faith in each other.* His examples included general references to friends, political leaders, and sports heroes.

John connected King Arthur to the character trait of courage, though he seemed to have mistaken “courage” for “tenacity”:

One of the characters that exemplifies courage is King Arthur. He goes through everything in the book from servitude, war, and even an unfaithful wife...to help bring peace to his kingdom and help his people out. A quote from the story that shows this is “Looking back at his life, it seemed to him that he had been struggling all the time to dam a flood, which, whenever he checked it had broken through at a new place, setting him his work again.” (698). This quote shows that King Arthur never gave up, even though nothing ever went according to his plan, he never got frustrated and just gave in and quit.

Although it could be argued that facing the obstacles John noted in his example takes courage as well as tenacity, John's analysis included the fact that Arthur *never gave up* and that *he never got frustrated and just gave in and quit*, explanations that suggested tenacity rather than courage. John included the example of Mohandas Gandhi to illustrate a modern example of courage in the face of great obstacles, an example that also illustrates tenacity.

John used the character of Lancelot to exemplify loyalty, describing how *Lancelot comes back to fight along side* (sic) Arthur when Mordred returns to threaten him. The example in modern society that John provided was a general, rather undeveloped reference to the military who *are loyal to their leaders and their country* and who *do what they told* (sic) *because they believe its* (sic) *is what is right*. John's final paragraph was similarly lacking in development—a perfunctory and formulaic conclusion to his essay.

Overall, John's interactions with the text and his recognition that the values represented therein cross cultures and generations and are present in our society suggested an ability to identify the issues of a text and apply them to his own life—skills inherent in critical literacy theory. In identifying modern-day antecedents of the issues in the text, John measured the values of Arthurian society and juxtaposed them with modern life, identifying discrepancies and similarities, while using appropriate examples, details, and support, and providing sufficient development of his ideas. However, because his interpretations remained somewhat one-dimensional and he did not move far beyond the text besides identification of the issue, his analysis provided *significant evidence* of the development of critical literacy skills.

Summary: Case Study A

In their verbal responses throughout this lesson, the students discussed issues of human nature and man's decency, the relationship between populations and their leaders, and the implications of action versus inaction, among other issues. The students implicitly addressed several aspects of critical literacy by *articulating the complexity of issues and themes, disrupting the commonplace* or intended meaning of the text, and using the text as a springboard for *self-reflection*, making text-to-world and text-to-self connections. Though their ideas lacked full development and specific, appropriate examples at times, they built off each other's ideas throughout the class, developing ideas over the duration of the lesson. Their verbal interactions suggested a range of evidence of critical literacy skills, from *minimal* to *significant* on the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric.

In their written responses, students identified interesting comparisons with modern society as they analyzed the Arthurian tale. Some of their connections and insights were remarkable, while other remained jejune. Their examples were vague at

times, but often illustrated their ideas clearly. Their written responses suggested a wide range of ability levels and skill-development, suggesting a range of evidence of critical literacy skills, from *minimal* to *significant evidence* on the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric.

The students were able to exhibit *significant evidence* of critical literacy skills at times, though they generally did not provide full development of their ideas, nor did they consistently provide appropriate, meaningful examples to support their opinions. Overall, while there is some evidence that students had the *potential* to achieve exemplary development of critical literacy skills, an assessment that is based on the insights they shared, the fact that they did not provide sufficient evidence to warrant their conclusions generally limited their achievement on the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric. Therefore, the preponderance of evidence suggests that in the Adams High School classroom *critical literacy skills were developed to a significant level through fantasy literature*, as defined in the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric.

Case Study B: Butler High School

School community and demographics

Butler High School is a small-sized secondary school in Connecticut, serving students in grades nine through twelve. It is a rural district located in the western-central part of Connecticut's interior. Butler High School has a current population of approximately 500 students with a nearly equal male/female ratio. The student racial profile is predominantly Caucasian (97.0%) (CT SDE, 2011). Hispanic (2.0%), Asian American (0.5%), and black (0.5%) students comprise the remainder of the student body. In the graduating class of 2009, 80.0% of graduates attended a two- or four-year college, 9.3% attended a technical or preparatory school, and 10.7% went into the work force or military. The graduation rate was 91.5%, approximately equal to the state average of 91.3%.

The average class size in English is approximately 16.6 students, significantly lower than the state average of 19.7 students. The average number of years of experience in education attained by the teaching staff is 11.8, lower than the state average of 14.0 years. Student performance on standardized tests was above state average, however. Students taking the SAT I in Critical Reading, the area of the SAT I that is most relevant to this research, scored an average of 520 (on the SAT I, a nationwide test, scores range from 200 to 800, with 500 being considered average), while the state average was 503. The Butler High School score was considered to be in the upper sixth decile among Connecticut high schools. The other primary standardized test used for comparison is the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT). In the subject area tested by the CAPT that is most relevant to this research—Reading Across the Disciplines—Butler High School students also scored in the sixth decile among Connecticut high schools.

Teacher background: Nate Berger

The data from which this sketch was created was drawn from two interviews (during which only Mr. Berger and I were present) over a period of approximately seven weeks. The first interview—which included questions from interview Stages One and Two—lasted 46 minutes, and the second 22 minutes. The first interview was conducted approximately three weeks before Mr. Berger began a unit in which the students were reading J.K. Rowling's (1997) novel *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. The second interview was conducted after the conclusion of the unit. The quoted material presented here was derived from both interviews and is organized thematically, not chronologically.

The Butler High School teacher-participant in this study is Nate Berger who has been teaching high school English for three years. He teaches a one-semester twelfth grade course entitled, "Fantasy, Fairy Tales, and Myth." This is the third time he has taught this course, although he did not develop it originally. The course itself has been offered to students for twelve years, having been created by a teacher who has since retired from teaching.

A relatively young teacher, Mr. Berger obtained his undergraduate degree in English from Central Connecticut State University and his Master of Science in Education at the University of New Haven. He has spent all three of his years as a teacher, plus an additional year as an intern, at Butler High School. Although he is *more of a fan of science fiction* than fantasy literature, Mr. Berger seems quite familiar with numerous fantasy texts. He is confident and comfortable discussing fantasy and teaching.

In speaking of his teaching style, Mr. Berger notes that he does *a lot of group work in the classroom*, an approach that his *students seem to enjoy*. He tries to *project a very upbeat and passionate presence* in front of the students, hoping that they *will pick*

up on that and respond positively. His classroom is student-centered, and he likes to *use small groups so that the kids can learn from each other* and have more *opportunities for conversation* during the whole-class discussions. He likes to *get to know them individually*, building strong relationships with them and attempting to tap into their interests around which he constructs his lessons. He also seems to be a popular teacher, his classroom being a focal point for students to congregate in the morning or during lunch.

Given his predisposition toward conversation in general, Mr. Berger enjoys using books in his classroom *that have a depth and richness to them* that provoke conversation and that *talk about issues*. Books that have *interesting characters...in interesting situations* and that incorporate elements that the students *can relate to* are important considerations when Mr. Berger selects texts for his classes. After trying to teach *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* from a *structural perspective*, he noticed that the *students didn't seem to really enjoy that very much*, so he *changed the unit to focus much more on Harry and the choices that he makes and why he makes those and whether the students agreed with those choices and understood the reasoning behind them*, a change that *worked out really well* for him and his students. Continuing that practice, Mr. Berger likes *to talk about issues because...issues are what students can connect to better than the situations the characters are in*. The issues also *make the book more compelling and can help the student deal with that issue themselves*.

Mr. Berger finds fantasy a useful genre in the classroom and has noticed that *students are really getting more into fantasy, that there seems to be a revival of sorts ever since Harry Potter came out in the 1990s. It's almost a renaissance of fantasy* in modern literature, the genre enjoying an *immense popularity among students*. Although his male students seem not to enjoy reading fantasy books that *focus more on romance*, such as the *Twilight* books (Meyer, 2005), *than on hardcore fantasy elements*, they do

appreciate being able to read fantasy literature in school in part because *it brings them back to their childhood in some ways*.

Mr. Berger's understanding of critical literacy seems more intuitive than textbook. Critical literacy, he explains, means *being able to comprehend* a text, and being able to both critique the text and analyze *what an author is trying to do in a text*. He strives to create *an awareness in students of that message so that students understand how to read a book for that message and discern what the author is doing*. To this end, he focuses on *a book from a moral perspective*, helping students to *take a close look at what the author is trying to say about morality* and how they interpret the concepts of *good and evil* in fantasy texts particularly.

Although critical literacy does not address morality *per se*, moral choices are often embedded subtextually, meaning the moral compass of a character often informs his or her choices in a novel, thus driving the narrative to some extent. A character's morality simmers beneath the surface of a text and is implicit in their actions, just as a person's moral fiber in real life is implicit in their actions as well. Addressing the morality that underlies the text can be interpreted as an aspect of *cultural discourse*. As the students make this morality explicit and provide examples and support from the text, they are identifying ways the author has *positioned* them to accept that morality as appropriate. The concepts of positioning and the process of identifying the dominant cultural discourse within a text are both integral to critical literacy theory.

Mr. Berger is sensitive to the close relationship shared among the students, the text, and critical literacy itself. He notes that *you can [teach] critical literacy skills with any text* if the teacher is *willing to commit to the text and really explore what these themes mean*. *The buy-in*, he says, *has to come from the teacher* who must be *invested in hearing the student voice and look at the students' lived experiences as valid and worthwhile to bring into the classroom, or the entire thing is just going to fall apart*.

To underscore that point, Mr. Berger emphasizes the reciprocal nature of teaching, saying that *teaching is not a single-direction activity....The only way you can teach is through a circular process: You provide things to the students; the students provide reactions, commentaries, their own thoughts, their own teachings; and you learn from that, adapt, change, and then continue to provide more....There's got to be a thought and synthesis behind teaching.* This interactivity between teacher and student, the focus on eliciting student participation and thought, and the emphasis on a student-centered approach to teaching are certainly concepts well-supported by critical literacy theory. The cyclical and recursive nature of teaching Mr. Berger describes, in fact, embodies Freire's concept of praxis.

Course overview: "Fantasy, Fairy Tales, and Myth"

"Fantasy, Fairy Tales, and Myth" is a well-entrenched course, having been taught during each of the past twelve years at Butler High School, starting in the 2000-01 school year. It has currently enrolled sixteen students, an average-sized class for the school. It began, speculates Mr. Berger, in response to the *Harry Potter* books which came out in 1997 and remain popular today. In the course, Mr. Berger covers the *traditional fantasy with the swords and princesses and evil dragons and stuff*, including such texts as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997), *The Golden Compass* (Pullman, 1995), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865), and *The Once and Future King* (White, 1958) as well as the film version of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Jackson, 2001) and various fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen.

As he noted above, Mr. Berger is strongly concerned with helping the students connect their own lives to the fantasy texts he introduces them to in class, particularly with the moral aspects of the works. For example, he incorporates *The Golden*

Compass (Pullman, 1995) into his classes because it is a nice lead-in to Harry Potter because it takes an 'alternate universe' approach and provides an interesting moral perspective. Pullman, Mr. Berger notes, is so anti-Christian, yet his text is fairly moral, suggesting that morality is outside the bounds of the Church. Harry Potter also contains an interesting moral element...that's appealing to students in addition to being just a fun book to read. Since the students have grown up with it too, some part of them remembers the enjoyment they first felt at reading it on their own, creating that sense of nostalgia for the students and enabling Mr. Berger to help them make a lot of good connections to their own lives through that book.

In addition to the exploration of morality, Mr. Berger helps the students to connect with other issues in the text that they may be experiencing, such as the 'growth' issue, since Harry grows significantly throughout the series, growth which many of the students have shared with Harry over the years. Mr. Berger even marries the two issues of maturation and morality, asking the students questions such as, *How do you become the person you want and need to be?* and *How do they create and hold onto their values?* He encourages them to compare their own sensibilities to Harry by asking the students, *Would you want to have [Harry] as your friend?* This, Mr. Berger points out, begins to connect the students with the text in a really deep and personal way that can become self-reflective. Students, he says, need to be willing to do some self-reflection and figure out why they want that change, who benefits from that change, and who might suffer from that change—ideas that are intimately embedded in the philosophy of critical literacy. Although he says that he emphasizes the morality of fantasy works when teaching *Harry Potter*, he also helps them explore other issues such as growing up, fitting in, isolation, adoption, alienation, and making successful transitions, the latter a particularly timely issue for these high school seniors who will soon be making transitions to college, the armed services, or the working world within a few months.

As with Miss Jameson (above), Mr. Berger has difficulty identifying what categorizes a book as ‘fantasy,’ saying, *fantasy is such a broad and difficult-to-define genre*. He identifies several authors by way of definition, noting *modern fantasy writers* such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Neil Gaiman, George R.R. Martin, Terry Brooks, J.K. Rowling, and even Stephenie Meyer, as well as *old-fashioned, traditional writers* like J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Rider Haggard. *Those are fantasy texts*, he says, *because they take situations that are realistic but they put them into an unrealistic milieu*. He elaborates, saying that *fantasy is any kind of a work that deals with unreality, ...that forces the characters to encounter a situation that is unrealistic and wouldn't happen in normal, everyday life*. But given those situations, *a lot of the other stuff that follows should be realistic or could really happen*. *The setting could be unrealistic, like Narnia, or realistic, like in Harry Potter, but the situations incorporate elements that are unrealistic: wizards, and magic, and talking animals, things like that*.

When asked about the strengths of using fantasy literature in the classroom, Mr. Berger was able to identify several, beginning with the fact that the students *may already be predisposed to enjoying fantasy*, a likely scenario in an elective class such as “Fantasy, Fairy Tales, and Myth.” If they are not predisposed toward fantasy, at least *they tend not to be afraid of it or as intimidated by it* as they might by such an *extremely difficult book to read* as *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1850), for example. As he pointed out earlier, *fantasy can draw on situations either that the kids are familiar with (like Harry Potter) or can at least relate to (like The Golden Compass)*. *Fantasy books may take them back to a time when they read these books as children—the ‘nostalgia’ effect discussed above*. Mr. Berger notes the popularity of the recent fantasy films based on books, such as those based on *Harry Potter*, the *Narnia* series, or *Twilight*, to name only a few which can hook the students into fantasy.

Finally, Mr. Berger points out that *one of the great strengths of fantasy novels deals with a suspension of disbelief*. He explains that a student who picks up a fantasy novel is prepared to accept the unreality of the setting and is more willing to suspend their disbelief, as opposed to readers of realistic novels who may be shocked out of their reading experience more readily because their expectations of the reality of the presentation tends to be more rigid than the reader of fantasy. *In a fantasy novel, you have a little bit more leeway and a little bit more swing to that*, he says. Such acceptance of these fantastical elements, as is often seen in children (which may explain in part the preponderance of children's fantasy texts), seems less a function of age, however, than of a reader's concreteness or their imagination.

As regards weaknesses, the student's predisposition toward fantasy may be unfavorable at the outset, *in which case no fantasy is going to hook them*. Mr. Berger also points out that *some of the books are very difficult to read*, such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* books which are *written in a very difficult style that the students are unfamiliar with*. Along these same lines, many fantasy books *reference different worlds with strange place-names, complicated, unfamiliar character names, and foreign histories*. Finally, Mr. Berger points out the lengths of fantasy works, many of which *tend to be long* and to be published as series of novels, a critique noted above by Miss Jameson.

In regards to his use of *Harry Potter* in the classroom, Mr. Berger has not encountered any resistance from parents, even though he is aware that *some parents don't like it because they think it promotes witchcraft*. His school administration has been *very supportive* of the class, but Mr. Berger did encounter one parental objection to his use of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* in his freshman class, though her concerns were not centered on the content of the novel: she *objected that her daughter was being asked to read a children's book in high school*. Mr. Berger explained the book's value as a

teaching tool to illustrate *aspects of the epic journey and to compare with The Odyssey*, and the parent relented, though she was not *won over* by his arguments. Rather, Mr. Berger felt that *she just sort of agreed to not raise a fuss over it*.

Mr. Berger's class is comprised entirely of seniors, most of whom chose the class as one of the two one-semester senior electives they are required to take. Some students were placed into the class randomly, however. In addition to taking the course due to a predisposition toward fantasy, as Mr. Berger noted above, some students enroll in the class because they *feel like it's going to be an easy course to take because most of the time, they equate fantasy and science fiction with enjoyable reading. They perceive it as light-hearted, lighter fare, ...as much more fun and not really school-related. But they find out very quickly that it's not*. Such a perspective can be turned to a teacher's advantage, as Mr. Berger points out: *Even if it's difficult and challenging subject material or difficult and challenging language, they look at it as a pleasure reading that, when you begin to kind of suss out the deeper themes and deeper meanings, it comes much more naturally to them. They can enjoy it and read it for just the story, and then begin to get the deeper and more subtle meanings as they go*, enabling a teacher to combine the joy of reading with the intellectual rigor required to analyze a complex text.

Although this depth or richness is obviously not unique to fantasy, *it happens in fantasy more than most other genres because of a lot of the more fantastical elements of it*. Mr. Berger is quick to qualify that this depth is not inherent in all fantasy texts, but *at least in the well-written and well-done fantasy literature, we're seeing that there's more than just knights and swords and dragons and wizards and all those kinds of things*. Ironically, then, some students might enroll in a fantasy literature course because *many of them are looking for the easy way out*, not realizing the depth to which they will be engaging with the texts. A teacher can take advantage of student

perceptions of fantasy in a way that is unavailable to teachers of traditional, canonical works since *there's a resistance that some students have toward reading books that they wouldn't pick up themselves*, unlike fantasy. Some students *approach literature reluctantly, but that's the biggest advantage to teaching the fantasy and science fiction books since the students are sort of predisposed to them. They're more willing to give the book the benefit of the doubt and interact with it and read it.*

Lesson observation #1: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997)

Mr. Berger was observed three times during this study. The first observed lesson occurred on 29 November 2011. When the lesson itself took place, the class was approximately halfway through their study of *Harry Potter*, according to Mr. Berger. The students had been assigned to read pages 141 through 201 in the text in preparation for the day's lesson. (While sixty pages of reading may seem like a particularly large amount of text to read, it must be remembered that the students were on holiday for four days during which they were expected to read the selection.)

At this point in the text, eleven-year-old Harry Potter had just arrived at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and was "sorted" (*i.e.*, assigned) into Gryffindor House which accepted students who were "brave at heart" (Rowling, 1997, p. 146). The other Houses were Hufflepuff for the "just and loyal" (Rowling, 1997, p. 147), Ravenclaw for "those of wit and learning" (Rowling, 1997, p. 147), and Slytherin which housed "cunning folk [who] use any means / To achieve their ends" (Rowling, 1997, p. 147). The next day, Harry encountered Professor Snape, the Potions Master, with whom he shared an inexplicable enmity. Following this class was their first flying lesson during which Harry stood up against a bully on behalf of his friend Neville. Harry nearly got himself in trouble for unauthorized flying on his broomstick, but since he showed admirable flying skill, was instead welcomed onto the Quidditch team.

Finally, Harry was challenged to a midnight duel by Draco Malfoy (the bully referenced above), but after Draco neglected to appear and Harry and his friends Hermione and Ron were almost caught by the night caretaker, Harry encountered a huge three-headed dog which seemed to be guarding a trapdoor.

Soon after the students settled into their seats, Mr. Berger directed their attention to two questions written on the board—*Does the housing system used in Hogwarts create a sense of unity or separation, or does it do both? Is the system ultimately beneficial or harmful to the students?* (Berger)—and asked them to write answers while he took attendance. Following a discussion of this question, the students engaged in an extended conversation that lasted the rest of the class period and concerned the personal qualities that place students into the various Houses, applying those qualities to specific characters by way of example. This conversation blended into one concerning Rowling's perceptions of Good and Evil in the story and the symbolism embedded in the Houses and even characters' names.

The observed lesson incorporated open-ended questioning which encouraged students to participate fully and engage with the ideas of the text. An emphasis was placed on an understanding and interpretation of the material, followed by a conceptual discussion of the ideas represented. The evidence analyzed were the students' verbal responses to the questions. (The written responses were not available for analysis.) All sixteen students enrolled in the class were present during the lesson which lasted approximately fifty minutes. The students sat in desks arranged in two semi-circles.

The two introductory questions helped students address the complexity of the Housing system at Hogwarts, then asked them to comment upon it. The first question was presented as essentially multiple-choice, with three possibilities provided, though the students were also asked to explain their answers. In responding to the first

question, the students developed and refined each other's responses to illustrate the complexity of the issue:

MICHELLE

I wrote that it creates a sense of unity within the House, but as a whole school, it creates separation. In the Houses, you learn and have classes with the same people, but with other Houses, you don't do that. You don't really get to know them.

...

MR. BERGER

Anthony?

ANTHONY

I think it creates similarity because it kind of puts the Houses against each other in competition. The school itself is united in that they all compete against each other like in the quidditch game and the House standings. So as much as it's separate, they're all trying to reach the same goal.

MR. BERGER

All right. David?

DAVID

I said that, yes, it's unity within the Houses and the competing can be seen as separation. I do like Anthony's idea, but what I said was that also, by having some mixed classes, like having classes with some people from one House and some people from another, I think that also creates at least a sense of unity in the school as a whole, rather than it being a competition all the time.

In the excerpt above, Michelle provided an answer that addressed the surface features of the system—the mechanics of the Housing system. Anthony moved beyond the physical system and addressed the larger impact of the system by introducing the concept of the House standings. David extended the development of their analysis, synthesizing those two ideas by incorporating Michelle's idea of the physical structure with the broader impact of the system on the school as a whole. Because the students articulated the complexity of the Housing system and provided specific evidence of that

complexity but neglected to address the larger application to the world, this exchange suggested *significant evidence* of critical literacy skills development.

The second question was much more open-ended since the students were not provided with any criteria by which to judge the values of “beneficial” and “harmful”: They were required to define their terms in their responses. Their responses immediately addressed the complexity of the issue:

MR. BERGER

Is the system ultimately beneficial or harmful to the students?

RYAN

It’s kind of like a combo, I said. It can be harmful because the students are more hostile to each other, like the whole Malfoy thing. But it can be beneficial because it makes them strive to outdo one another in order to win the House Cup. I kind of compared it to our [Student] Advisory system here: You try to do better things so you can get a Recognition Slip and maybe win something.

MR. BERGER

Okay. So it’s good because it creates a sense of competition which helps us strive to excel?

RYAN

Yeah. It pushes people to do their best.

MR. BERGER

Good. Other opinions? Christina?

CHRISTINA

I think it’s ultimately beneficial because it’s teaching all the students to work as a team and to strive for the best.

MR. BERGER

When you say it helps them work as a team, do you mean within the House?

CHRISTINA

Yeah.

MR. BERGER

Okay. So for you, the system creates a sense of cooperation with the group.

CHRISTINA

Yeah. Even though some people hate each other, the whole school doesn't hate each other, so I don't see how it could be that harmful. It's not like something really bad's going to happen. It's not like they're going to start a big fight or something because the teachers are all right there, and they're always on top of them.

MR. BERGER

Okay. So it can do both: Create a sense of cooperation and a sense of competition among students. What else? Other opinions on this?

JENNIFER

I guess I'll go. I said that it's beneficial because it makes the students feel part of something so they can be closer within these groups, but yet they can still interact with others in the hallways and classes and stuff.

As they developed their responses, the students seemed to be applying the terms “beneficial” and “harmful” to the personal development and moral fiber of the characters in the story. As Ryan noted, the system helps people reach their full potential as individuals through competition. Christina and Jennifer noted the value implicitly placed on team-building within the House—the system, she suggested, created an automatic identity for the students. Through their recognition of the complexity of the issue, their use of examples, their multiple applications of the terms (*i.e.*, to the individual, to the Houses, and to the school as a whole), and their application of the concepts to society, the students exhibited *significant evidence*³⁴ of critical literacy skills. Their analysis falls short of an “exemplary” rating because their insights were an extension of the previous conversation and did not reveal new revelations or more profound insights that furthered their understanding of the complexities of the text.

Further into the conversation, the students began discussing the various personal traits that established the characters as members of the various Houses. The students generated a list of characteristics, using quotes from the text to supply support and applicable adjectives, when one of the students questioned Hermione's placement as a Gryffindor:

³⁴ Initially, this analysis was given a rating of *exemplary* on the Rubric Scale, but following a discussion with the auditor, who suggested that the students' responses seemed repetitive and lacked the depth and insight warranting an *exemplary* score, a rating of *satisfactory* was agreed upon.

KEN

Why isn't [Hermione] a Ravenclaw if it's for all the smart kids?

MR. BERGER

That's a really good question. Why is she a Gryffindor? Anyone?

HELENA

Because even though she's really smart, she has a lot of guts.

MR. BERGER

Okay. In the novel, she is presented as being really good in school. She studies hard, she knows a lot of magic, she knows magic before she even gets into the school, she's read all her schoolbooks ahead of time. It seems as though her dominant characteristic is intelligence. It seems as though she would be a really good fit for Ravenclaw. Whereas Gryffindors, their dominant characteristic is their courage, their bravery.

HELENA

Maybe Rowling is trying to emphasize her courage.

This is important to highlight since it illustrates how the students questioned the text and disrupted the commonplace interpretation by articulating alternate possibilities for the text. A close examination of the characters' placements in the various Houses yielded an interesting complexity, that of authorial intention. Later in the conversation, Mr. Berger asked the students how the novel might be different if Hermione were in Ravenclaw, and the students speculated that perhaps the three main characters would not interact with any significant frequency, suggesting a further complexity in Hermione's presentation as a character: Perhaps she was a Gryffindor out of convenience. The students then applied the Housing assignment system to themselves, analyzing their own outstanding characteristics and placing themselves in a House. The students' suggestion that Hermione might be "misplaced" in Gryffindor out of convenience to the plot—an interpretation the author was unlikely to have intended since it would diminish the value of the characters—was an example of disrupting the

commonplace. This idea, in addition to the self-reflection required of the students to place themselves in a House, suggested *exemplary evidence* of critical literacy skills.

Finally, interpolated in the students' conversation about Hermione's placement in Gryffindor was an observation that led to a discussion of Good and Evil:

MR. BERGER

What's also interesting is that Harry Potter is almost placed in Slytherin. The Sorting Hat seemed to be having some difficulty, putting him either in Slytherin or Gryffindor, one of these two. There's another quality that's associated with these two Houses in particular. What is it?

RYAN

Good and evil.

MR. BERGER

Okay. You interpret them as good and evil?

RYAN

My bad³⁵. I didn't mean to shout that out.

MR. BERGER

That's okay. We talked earlier about this. The 'good versus evil' trope is really important to the fantasy genre. If you want to apply these labels here, we'll see how they will work. What are some qualities J.K. Rowling sees as 'good'? What does she see as 'evil'? If you want to apply these terms to those Houses, we need to examine the implications. First of all, which House is which?

RYAN

The Gryffindors are good, and Slytherin is evil.

MR. BERGER

Why do you say that?

RYAN

Because Harry's in Gryffindor. He's the main character. We're supposed to like him.

MR. BERGER

And why don't we like the Slytherins?

This is important because it involved a discussion of how Rowling positions the reader to view certain events in specific ways. Mr. Berger's questions about *why* the reader

³⁵ An American colloquialism meaning, "My mistake."

likes or does not like certain characters led the students to speculate on textual evidence that causes them to adopt the author's implicit criteria to make value judgments. In discussing the qualities of a Slytherin, Anthony noted that Draco Malfoy, the quintessential Slytherin, is *mean and nasty* and *arrogant*, and that *Hagrid said something about all the wizards who've gone into Slytherin have turned out bad*. Ryan also noted that *Slytherin was Voldemort's House*, the most-reviled character in the series. Once the students identified how they were supposed to feel about the Houses, Mr. Berger reminded them of the adjectives they used to define each House before finally connecting those ideas to create tentative definitions of good and evil: The former being defined by *courage, bravery, honesty, daring, and helping other people*, and the latter described as *cunning, opportunistic, and Machiavellian*. The recognition, implicitly, of how the reader is positioned by the text along with the support provided and the complexity of analysis, tempered by their lack of resistance to the author's position (they completely accept it), suggests *exemplary evidence* of critical literacy skills.

Throughout this lesson, the students interacted closely with the text, examining various aspects of its underlying structure and themes. Taking the lesson as a whole, the students explored the *dominant cultural discourse* through examining good and evil and how the reader is positioned to accept the author's interpretation of them, discussed the *complexity of themes and issues* through a discussion of the system of Houses and the characters, *disrupted the commonplace* interpretation of Hermione's placement in Gryffindor, and used the text as a means of *self-reflection* to determine into which House, according to their own dominant characteristics, they might be placed by the Sorting Hat. Therefore, the preponderance of evidence suggests that the students have demonstrated *exemplary evidence* of critical literacy skills overall in this lesson.

Lesson observation #2: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997)

This, the second of three observations, occurred on 1 December 2011, almost immediately after the first observation. In preparation for this lesson, the students had read chapters ten and eleven, pages 202 through 239, of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997). All sixteen students were present in class.

In the first of these two chapters, the game of quidditch—a game played on broomsticks—was explained. Tensions rose between Harry and Ron on one side and Hermione on the other, as the boys seemed to have difficulty getting along with their female friend. The tension was defused when Harry and Ron rescued Hermione from a troll that attacked her in the girls' bathroom, an act that simultaneously began and cemented their mutual friendship. Chapter eleven began with a quidditch match during which Harry was magically attacked but was saved through Hermione's intervention. Following this, the friends discovered that Nicholas Flamel was involved in some strange mystery that partially motivated the plot and involved an artifact hidden in Hogwarts and guarded by a three-headed dog.

In a preliminary exposition to class, Mr. Berger explained about an upcoming essay assignment on *Harry Potter*. The essay offered two topics for students to choose between: One involved analyzing moral lessons taught by the book and applying them to the students' own lives; the other essay asked students to explore possible reasons the *Harry Potter* books were so incredibly popular with children. Following this explanation, Mr. Berger began the class proper.

As with the prior observation, the class began with questions written on the board that the students were directed to answer: *Should teachers have to follow the rules in school, or does their position as employees and adults exempt them (or 'privilege' them) in some way? What rules, or types of rules, should they have to follow? What rules should they be exempt from, if any?* (Berger). The students were

given five minutes to write their answers. The rest of the class was devoted to an extended discussion of the introductory questions, which Mr. Berger connected to the novel, and other, related issues. The predominant pedagogical method was inquiry, in which students explored an open-ended question deeply to arrive at a conclusion which has broad implications, rather than explore a narrow topic that is related only to a single text or part of a text.

The first part of the class was devoted to a theoretical exploration of the topic of fairness and the equitable application of school rules to both students and faculty. The students were eager to share their opinions about this issue, providing explanations and examples to support their ideas. All students who spoke were opposed to the idea that teachers should be held to a different standard than students.

Michelle noted that *it seems very hypocritical* if faculty were exempt from certain rules that the students were held to. In affirming that position, Elizabeth explained that *rules are put in place to limit distractions, and eating in class or texting in class or whatever is not allowed because it's a distraction. It would still be a distraction even if a teacher was [sic] doing it.* According to Tiffany, such a double standard *causes students to [want to] rebel.* Helena pointed out that *a teacher will say something like they're adults and they can do it because they're exempt. But...we should be allowed to do whatever since we're almost [adults] anyway.*

When two students began to complain about specific instances of perceived injustices in particular classes, Mr. Berger warned them to *be careful that we don't talk about specific teachers and use their names....Try to keep the conversation theoretical and abstract.* After some more brief discussion about the issue of the equitable treatment of students, Mr. Berger directed the students toward the novel, asking the students, *Are there any instances you see in the novel where teachers are not following the rules consistently?*

Here, the conversation turned toward Hagrid and his treatment of Dudley, Harry's abusive, adoptive older brother who was magically attacked by Hagrid and given a pig's tail. Mr. Berger explained Hagrid's background, which is germane to this analysis:

When Hagrid was a student at Hogwarts, he used to keep a lot of pets, most of which were illegal to keep. One day, a girl was attacked by a creature, and she died. One of the pets Hagrid was keeping was accused of killing her, and since Hagrid was responsible for the creature's presence in Hogwarts, he was expelled from the school and his wand was broken. The problem is, it wasn't that creature that killed the girl. . . .Dumbledore liked [Hagrid] and saw that the punishment wasn't exactly fair, so he kept him on as groundskeeper. (Berger)

When Jennifer asked why he was allowed to stay at Hogwarts even though he had broken the rules, Mr. Berger explained:

MR. BERGER

I want to stick with this book for now. Hagrid's issue involves information revealed in some of the other books. What are some other rules that are allowed to be broken?

MICHELLE

Well, it's not really a rule, but Snape seriously hates Gryffindor, so he treats them very differently. Much more harshly. Also, McGonagall makes that exception for Harry to get on the quidditch team, but that was extraordinary circumstances.

MR. BERGER

Okay, but didn't Madam Hooch warn them not to get on their brooms while she was gone with Neville? Both Harry and Draco flew around on theirs, and Harry was even caught by Professor McGonagall, right? I'm not suggesting he should have been expelled from Hogwarts, but shouldn't she have punished him at least? But you mentioned circumstances. What are those 'extraordinary circumstances'?

MICHELLE

Gryffindor needed a Seeker for quidditch, and Harry looked promising.

MR. BERGER

So let me get this straight: McGonagall broke a rule and undermined a fellow teacher because of an extracurricular activity? Do you think that's fair?

MICHELLE

Well, maybe not.

RYAN

Come on, it's quidditch!

MR. BERGER

Right, it's a sport. What kind of message does that send to other students?

ANTHONY

You don't have to follow the rules if you're really good at a sport.

MR. BERGER

Does that sort of thing happen here, at this school?

SEVERAL STUDENTS

Yeah, yes. With football. And basketball.

MR. BERGER

Okay, so is that fair?

SEVERAL STUDENTS

No, no way.

MR. BERGER

Good. So when we talk about morality, or ethical behavior, this is the sort of thing to focus on.

After this discussion, Mr. Berger concluded the lesson by asking the students to consider the moral implications behind Harry's gift of a broomstick from Professor McGonagall:

MR. BERGER

What's the rule about first-year students and broomsticks?

RYAN

No first-year students can have broomsticks. Unless McGonagall bends the rules for you if you are going to be a Seeker for Gryffindor.

MR. BERGER

Good. But then at the beginning of Chapter Ten, Harry receives a package. When he opens it, what's inside?

HELENA

A broomstick, a Nimbus 2000. It's from Professor McGonagall.

MR. BERGER

Right. Now let's look at the note. It's on page 203 to 204. She says, "I don't want everybody knowing you've got a broomstick or they'll all want one." She's all but admitting that it's not appropriate for him to have his own broomstick, yet she's the one who bought it for him.

MICHELLE

So she's not only allowing him to break the rules, but she's breaking the rules herself.

ANTHONY

And she's telling Harry to keep quiet about it.

MR. BERGER

Excellent. What do you think about that?

HELENA

That's so wrong.

MR. BERGER

Good. Again, this is an example of the morality that Rowling is suggesting is appropriate....Because we're on Harry's side, we're supposed to agree with that. At the very least, those choices are presented to us, the readers, as appropriate.

The students who participated in the discussion demonstrated a clear understanding of the issue of morality, first through their application of a moral question to their own lives, and later by applying that same question to the novel they were reading and back again. Their text references were appropriate, clear, and accurate, and their conversation addressed issues of morality and positioning, albeit the term *positioning* was never used in the discussion. Positioning was only tangentially referenced when the students spoke of why Rowling seemed to favor Hagrid and Harry, and at the end of the lesson when Mr. Berger pointed out that the reader tends to support Rowling's moral stance because *we're on Harry's side*. However, because the students did not take it upon themselves to extend the conversation and address any additional complexities to the moral aspects beyond those Mr. Berger directed them toward, nor did they or Mr. Berger suggest ways to address the social injustices in their own school

regarding athletics that the students had pointed out earlier, the students exhibited *significant evidence* of critical literacy skills through this lesson.

Lesson observation #3: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997)

The final observation at Butler High School took place on 5 December 2011 and encompassed chapters twelve and thirteen (pp. 240-282) in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997). This two-part lesson involved a whole-class discussion followed by small group work, all focused on the Mirror of Erised, a device from the novel that reflected an observer's deepest desire instead of their reflection. All sixteen students were again present for the lesson. Due to a scheduling change, this lesson lasted sixty minutes, rather than the usual fifty.

In the text, the school was preparing for Christmas holiday, though Harry and Ron chose to remain at Hogwarts to investigate the mysterious Nicholas Flamel. In addition to several mundane gifts from friends, Harry received an invisibility cloak from an unknown source, though the attached note suggested that the cloak belonged to Harry's father. Harry unsuccessfully used the cloak to attempt to infiltrate the library's Restricted Section. After causing a disturbance, Harry was chased away and ended up in a strange room with a large mirror—the Mirror of Erised. In it, Harry saw himself surrounded by his parents and numerous relatives. When he returned with Ron the next evening, he again saw his family, but Ron saw something different—himself holding the Quidditch cup and the House Cup, and himself as head boy. The boys soon discovered the secret of the Mirror, aided in their revelation by Professor Dumbledore, who found Harry sitting transfixed in front of the Mirror. In the following chapter, Hermione discovered that Nicholas Flamel was a friend of Professor Dumbledore and was the only known possessor of the Sorcerer's Stone. Later, Harry helped Gryffindor

win their quidditch match against Hufflepuff House. After the match, he discovered Professor Snape having a secret conversation with Professor Quirrell.

At the start of the lesson, Mr. Berger again wrote a question on the board for students to answer: *How does Rowling want us to feel about the Mirror? How are we supposed to feel about Harry seeing himself reunited with his family? Is this something for him to embrace, or something he must overcome?* (Berger). The students began writing as Mr. Berger circulated among them. After they finished their work, Mr. Berger began class by discussing the concept of positioning, though he again did not identify the term as such:

MR. BERGER

Let's start at the beginning: How does Rowling want us to feel about the Mirror of Erised? And how does she create that perception?...

ELIZABETH

She wants us to see it as a punishment because she shows Harry something he can't have.

MR. BERGER

Okay. Explain how that's a punishment.

ELIZABETH

Well, Harry saw himself with his family, and that's where he most wants to be. But that's never going to happen because [his parents] are dead. So it's like a punishment.

MR. BERGER

So the Mirror punishes? Does it punish Ron?

ELIZABETH

Yes and no. He sees his brother. That's a way, right?

MR. BERGER

He sees himself as head boy and with the Quidditch cup. Is that a punishment?

ELIZABETH

Um, it could happen.

MR. BERGER

Okay, if it could happen, then it's not really a punishment for him.

ELIZABETH

I guess not.

MR. BERGER

So generally, then, the Mirror itself isn't a punishment, right? It's that Harry's interactions with it are...?

ELIZABETH

Not positive. Harry desires something that he can never have. With Ron, I guess there's potential there.

MR. BERGER

Okay. So it's complex. Go ahead, Helena.

HELENA

It's complex because different people look in it and see different things.

...

CHRISTINA

At first, I kind of perceived it as hope because you get excited for Harry because he sees his parents, but then you realize it's just a tease because it shows you something you desire more than anything, but you can't have it. Well, I guess Ron can have it in the future, but Harry can't.

...

MICHELLE

I said that Rowling wants Harry to overcome [what the Mirror shows] because she lets him see his family every night for a while, but then Dumbledore comes in and says that he's going to take the Mirror away, and Harry won't be able to see it anymore and he'd have to overcome his desires. It's like, you can't just sit here looking at this for the rest of your life. You have to live your own life. I also think, for the last question, that it kind of spills over into reality about what people should do: Look at your dream, okay, but don't dwell on it. Live your life and try to achieve that dream, if it's possible.

The students here grappled first with what the Mirror seemed to represent, then with its role in the novel, and finally with its significance to reality. The complexity of the image grew as the students turned the idea over in their minds and examined it, at Mr. Berger's prompting, from different angles, and they used examples to support their ideas.

Up to this point in the lesson, the students had largely responded to questions and prompts from Mr. Berger. As the students began relating the novel to their own lives in more significant ways, they offered ideas on their own:

MR. BERGER

Okay, so a lot of the issues that the boys and girls are dealing with at Hogwarts are similar to those ones we're dealing with in our lives, too. This Mirror of Desire here is also something that we're kind of faced with as young adults and even as adults.

ANTHONY

Maybe Rowling is saying something about goals and desires.

MR. BERGER

What do you mean?

ANTHONY

Well, goals are in the future, they're things you work for. Desires are things that you want to happen but you don't really want to work for. Like winning the lottery or something.

MR. BERGER

When she presents the idea of the Mirror to us, does she present it as something they can strive for, or does Harry get caught up in just the fantasy of it? So desires are one thing, and having a goal you can work toward is one thing, but just sitting and dwelling on it and thinking about it until it becomes this fantasy that you can't ever realize...that's the danger of this.

ANTHONY

So is she saying that we have to work toward our desires instead of just watching and hoping they happen?

MR. BERGER

I think there's a lot of evidence for that in the book.

CHRISTINA

Is she warning us against doing nothing, then? Against being, like, watchers instead of participants? Or maybe it's against having unrealistic desires?

The students took additional risks by positing interpretations of the text, and the ideas they proposed were complex but appropriate and supportable. More important than the ideas themselves was the fact that the students took ownership of the text, pushing against it and problematizing it on their own, without the direct prompting of the teacher. Although Mr. Berger initiated the inquiry with his opening questions, the students asserted themselves by conjecturing about the author's intentions like Anthony,

or by posing questions about meaning, like Christina. Due to the complexity of their responses to the novel—which could have been developed further or incorporated additional evidence—as well as the fact that they addressed several elements of critical literacy, including *positioning*, *problematizing*, and *self-reflection*, this part of the lesson suggests *significant evidence*³⁶ of critical literacy skills.

In the second half of the lesson, students worked for about five minutes in groups of four to answer a brief question or two (some groups were required to answer one question, some two) concerning the text. After the students completed their work, Mr. Berger called their attention and they began discussing each of the questions in turn. The first question asked the students to compare the Mirror of Erised in *Harry Potter* to the Mirror of Galadriel from the film, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Jackson, 2001). Galadriel's Mirror "shows many things...things that were...things that are...and some things that have not yet come to pass." After an initial, superficial interpretation in which Ken noted that the *Mirror of Erised is...addictive*, while *Lady Galadriel's Mirror is dangerous* because it causes worry, Anthony suggested that *they're basically opposites*.

MR. BERGER

What do you mean?

ANTHONY

Well, the Mirror of Erised makes you stay there and not want to do anything. People just sit and stare at it. But Lady Galadriel's Mirror is dangerous because it makes him want to leave and abandon the quest. Like it makes him want to do something he shouldn't do.

MR. BERGER

I don't follow.

ANTHONY

You know how he sees the Shire being burned up and everything? He wants to leave and go back there to stop it, but then Galadriel tells him

³⁶ Initially, this analysis was given a rating of *exemplary* on the Rubric Scale, but following a discussion with the auditor, who noted that the student's comments lacked sufficient depth and development to warrant a score of *exemplary*, a rating of *satisfactory* was agreed upon.

that if he leaves, he might make things worse or even make them come true. So her Mirror makes you want to do things that are bad, but the Mirror of Erised makes you want to not do things, which is bad. So that's the opposite.

His response, which categorized the devices as promoting action (*e.g.*, the Mirror of Galadriel) or causing inaction (*e.g.*, the Mirror of Erised)—both of which were identified as negative—was insightful in the dichotomy it established. The support was appropriate as well and suggested, in the complexities it recognized, *significant evidence* of critical literacy skills.

Finally, in the last question, Mr. Berger asked the students, *Why does Harry break the school rules and use the invisibility cloak to research Nicholas Flamel after hours in the restricted section of the library? What does this say about Harry?* Nicole provided her group's answer:

He was trying to understand what was going on with the Sorcerer's Stone to see if Snape was involved or what was going on with him because he thinks that he can break the rules to get the information. Basically, he thinks that he can do whatever he needs to get what he wants. That connects back to the [Sorting] Hat thinking that he should belong in Slytherin [House] because they will do whatever they want to get what they want. So that's like a Slytherin quality, but at the same time, he's trying to be brave and heroic, so that's his Gryffindor quality. (Nicole)

The group's answer *disrupted the commonplace* interpretation of Harry as being purely heroic, suggesting that he possesses traits belonging to the opposing House of Slytherin. Her answer was well-supported with implicit reference to events in the text, and suggested *exemplary evidence* of critical literacy skills.

In this lesson, the students examined the literary device of the Mirror of Erised by looking closely at the way the text *positions* the reader, by *problematizing* the author's use of the Mirror trope (though they did not *question* the Mirror's significance to the plot), and finally by taking ownership over the interpretation process to offer their own views and ask their own questions about the text unprompted by the teacher. In the

second part of the lesson, they drew comparisons between *Harry Potter* and the film *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Jackson, 2001) as they examined the mirror devices used in each text, and they *disrupted the commonplace* interpretation of Harry as unquestionably heroic. Therefore, the preponderance of evidence suggests that the students demonstrated *exemplary evidence* of critical literacy skills overall in this lesson.

Student essay analyses of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997)

Although Mr. Berger provided his students with a choice between two essay topics, and he received submissions addressing both (nine essays on morality and six essays on popularity), this research will only examine those essays that dealt with the topic of morality, since that was the topic most specifically addressed during the three lesson observations. The students were asked the following essay question:

We have talked about some of the moral aspects of the novel—not just Good and Evil in the traditional senses of the terms, but the moral fiber of each character and some of the choices they make. Identify three moral lessons the novel teaches readers. Explain the lessons, show how the novel explores them, and connect them to your own life or to our society, illustrating how a modern person such as yourself might apply these lessons specifically. Use only *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* as a reference, not the other books in the series. (Berger)

The essays were expected to be three or four pages in length. Fifteen of sixteen students submitted essays. This essay question asked students to identify and interpret moral actions the characters undertake, draw conclusions about them, and uncover the implicit (or “hidden”) morality the author seems to promote through the text. In other words, students were required to recognize the *dominant cultural discourse* from a moral perspective and identify how the text *positions* them to accept that discourse as appropriate. Additionally, students were asked to demonstrate the applicability of those moral lessons to their own lives, implicitly requiring students to *self-reflect* on their own

internal morality. Students had an opportunity through this question to carry the conversation further, comparing their own moral philosophy to that of the novel to consider whether the text challenged or confirmed their own ideologies. Finally, in identifying the moral choices the characters make, students may choose to comment on their appropriateness by articulating alternate readings of the text (*i.e., disrupting the commonplace* interpretation of the text) that challenge the author's moral viewpoint. Thus, several opportunities exist within this question—explicitly or implicitly—to demonstrate critical literacy skills.

Discussion of student essays

Within the nine essays that addressed the moral lessons embedded in the text, four major themes emerged that dealt with 1) greed and giving way to one's excessive desires, 2) breaking the rules, 3) humility, and 4) loyalty and self-sacrifice. The first theme—excessive desire or greed can be detrimental to an individual—was addressed in three essays. This insight was developed most effectively by Ryan who noted three examples from the novel in his discussion of the theme, developing his idea through the support he provided.

In his opening sentence, Ryan noted that *desire and greed can be a dangerous thing*. In clarifying what he meant by “dangerous,” Ryan explained that *greed and desires can corrupt people if they are always seeking out everything that they want*. He expanded his idea with additional examples and provided further development later in that same paragraph. Ryan's first example was of Dudley Dursley, Harry's adoptive brother, whom Ryan identified as *spoiled and greedy....He would throw food, and he just got worse as he got older he would beat up Harry, and other kids at school, and would through [sic] hysterical fits whenever he didn't get his way*. According to Ryan, giving way to one's greed and desires *can turn them into a spoiled rotten to the core*

child who respects no one except those whom he fears, like Hagrid who gave Dudley a pig's tail. Ryan's second example involved Voldemort, a powerful wizard who is the embodiment of evil in the novel series. According to Ryan, *Voldemort desires so much to return to his original [human] form that he is willing to...live out the rest of his years as a cursed man* as a result of drinking the blood of a unicorn. In his final example, Ryan recalled Harry's obsession with the Mirror of Erised which marked *the only time [Harry] truly belongs in this world.* While this may seem positive on the surface, Ryan qualified Harry's feelings by quoting Professor Dumbledore (Rowling, 1997, p. 265) who warned Harry of the dangers of the Mirror, saying that *'men have wasted away before it...or been driven mad'* by it. Thus, the concept of corruption of the individual—in spiritual, personal, and practical ways—emerged as the result of giving in to one's desires. In his real-world application of the moral principle of greed, Ryan was rather vague: *Many people become corrupted by greed in real life, like thieves, gamblers, and also spoiled children as in the case of Dudley.* Ryan's response suggested *significant evidence* of critical literacy through the development of his ideas, the examples he provided, and his implicit understanding of a personal morality.

The second major theme that emerged from the student essays and was exemplified in David's writing, was the Machiavellian concept that the ends justify the means. As David noted in his essay, *if the cause is important enough and good enough, some rules need to be broken.* In his first example from the text, David noted that Hagrid, Harry's good friend, illegally procured a dragon which was getting too large to manage and needed to be removed from the Hogwarts grounds. The only way to accomplish this, according to David, was *to go to the top of one of the towers at night so Ron's cousin [who studied dragons] could come get Norbert [the dragon]. The tower is off limits and students aren't allowed to be walking around at night. These rules had to be broken in order to save Hagrid and free Norbert.* On the surface, breaking the rules

and risking oneself for one's friends seemed noble, and this was clearly the way David intended the example to be interpreted, though he did not explicitly conclude this. However, David did not question the morality of Hagrid's actions that landed him in this predicament in the first place: obtaining a dragon illegally. David's text details were accurate, his position was somewhat developed, and he did address the morality of the situation. However, because he did not question the premise of the scene, nor develop his response fully, his answer implied only a rudimentary understanding of morality, suggesting *minimal evidence* of critical literacy skills.

The third theme discussed involved humility and was illustrated through Ken's essay. As with the two previous students' essays, Ken illustrated humility through three examples from the text, all involving Harry Potter directly. In the first example, Ken noted Harry's modesty when he crossed the first threshold into the "wizarding world" and entered the Leaky Cauldron, a pub for wizards. Ken noted that *everyone in the bar then got completely silent...[but] Harry became very modest about the whole situation and just kept moving on thinking he was not as big of a deal as people made him out to be*. Ken's next example involved Harry and his highly-regarded quidditch-playing abilities. He observed that *Harry discovers that he has the natural talent to become the newest Seeker on the Gryffindor House Team* and that the Gryffindor team captain *expects Harry to do amazing things on the quidditch field. Harry is very modest about his Quidditch playing abilities and he decided to spend a lot more time practicing*, Ken wrote. In his final example, Ken recalled the climactic scene of the novel, when Harry "found" the sorcerer's stone in his own pocket, having observed himself with it in the Mirror of Erised: *Harry was able to find the Sorcerer's Stone in the Mirror of Erised because Harry did not want to use the Stone for its elixir of life; he just wanted to find it in order to stop Voldemort from trying to come back to life*. Through these three examples, Ken developed an understanding of the sense of humility through Harry's

actions, though he did not comment on the value of this lesson; he seemed to take it for granted that humility was presented in the text as a positive character trait, especially since he used himself as an example of humble behavior: *I try and not let everyone's compliments [on my job as school weatherman] go to my head because I just see myself as doing a job that I really like doing for the School [sic]*. As with the previous student's work, Ken included accurate, appropriate details from the text and addressed an aspect of critical literacy. But because he did not fully develop his position, nor explicitly comment on how the reader is positioned by the text, his response suggests *minimal evidence* of critical literacy skills.

The final theme of loyalty and self-sacrifice was analyzed in two student essays. Both students identified a point toward the end of the story when the three friends faced several obstacles while attempting to thwart the person who wanted to steal the sorcerer's stone. Ron sacrificed himself in a wizard chess challenge, allowing himself to be taken so that his friends could continue. Ryan noted that, in performing this sacrifice, Ron *instantly becomes a truly good and heroic character* (Ryan), while Lindsay observed that Ron's willingness to sacrifice himself *is what makes them [Ron and Harry] such good friends* (Lindsay). Each student used additional evidence from the book along with providing examples from contemporary society: Ryan noted the daily sacrifices of police officers and firefighters, while Lindsay connected the concept to the support and loyalty provided by friends. The students developed their positions thoroughly, providing specific evidence from the text and connecting the lesson to their own lives, albeit in somewhat vague ways. They demonstrated a clear understanding of the critical literacy concept as well, though their understanding lacked complexity, and their development of the manifestation of morality in the novel was somewhat one-dimensional, thus suggesting *significant evidence* of critical literacy skills.

Summary: Case Study B

In their verbal responses in the three observed lessons, students discussed the morality represented in the novel through the characters' actions, the social structure as illustrated through the Housing system used at Hogwarts, and the concepts of good and evil. They also discussed author's purpose and speculated on some of the decisions Rowling made throughout the novel. They implicitly addressed critical literacy aspects such as *positioning*, *articulating the complexity of issues and themes*, and *disrupting the commonplace*. They also used the text as a springboard for *self-reflection*, connecting the text to their own lives and the world around them in order to create significance from the text. The students in class demonstrated an *exemplary* degree of evidence of critical literacy skills as they developed their answers thoroughly, provided appropriate evidence, addressed multiple aspects of critical literacy within each lesson, and offered rich analyses of the text.

Interestingly, the written responses of the students were less fully-developed and the analyses less significant. Although in the aggregate, they addressed numerous issues in the text, including greed and desire, rule-breaking, humility, and loyalty and self-sacrifice, their treatments of these issues were fairly flat and one-dimensional. For example, in their discussion of rule-breaking, the students merely observed the phenomenon in the text, noting that Rowling seemed to be suggesting that such actions were appropriate. However, the students did not comment on the morality of the author's message, nor did they connect the children's actions to larger motifs or psychologies in the world (*e.g.*, the rebelliousness of children, their inherent curiosity, their desire for power and control, or their need to separate from the adult world in some way). On the whole, their written responses ranged from *minimal evidence* of critical literacy skills to *significant evidence*.

The data would suggest that, when the responses of the students are directed by the teacher, or they have an opportunity to build off of each other's ideas, the students were able to provide *exemplary evidence* of critical literacy skills, but when responding in writing on their own—whether from an inherent limitation in the posed essay question, from a reluctance on their part to risk moving beyond the scope of the essay, or from an inability to recognize the complexity of the issues on their own—students did not exhibit more than *significant evidence* of critical literacy skills in their essays. Overall, the preponderance of evidence suggests that in the Butler High School classroom *critical literacy skills can be developed to an exemplary level through fantasy literature*, as defined in the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric.

Case Study C : Carter High School

School community and demographics

Carter High School is a large-sized secondary school in Connecticut, serving students in grades nine through twelve. It is a rural district located in the southwestern part of Connecticut, near Bridgeport, and close to the Connecticut shoreline. Carter High School has a current population of approximately 2,100 students with a nearly equal male/female ratio. The student racial profile is predominantly Caucasian (84.1%) (CT SDE, 2011). Hispanic (6.0%), black (5.5%), and Asian American (4.4%) students comprise the remainder of the student body. In the graduating class of 2010, 94.7% of graduates attended a two- or four-year college, 1.8% attended a technical or preparatory school, and 3.5% went into the work force or military. The graduation rate was 98.6%, significantly higher than the state average of 91.3%.

The average class size in English is approximately 20.1 students, approximately equal to the state average of 19.7 students. The average number of years of experience in education attained by the teaching staff is 12.3, slightly lower than the state average of 14.0 years. Student performance on standardized tests was above state average, however. Students taking the SAT I in Critical Reading, the area of the SAT I that is most relevant to this research, scored an average of 518 (on the SAT I, a nationwide test, scores range from 200 to 800, with 500 being considered average), while the state average was 503. The Carter High School score was considered to be in the sixth decile among Connecticut high schools. The other primary standardized test used for comparison is the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT). In the subject area tested by the CAPT that is most relevant to this research—Reading Across the Disciplines—Carter High School students scored in the eighth decile among Connecticut high schools.

Teacher background: James Parvis

The data from which this sketch was created were drawn from two interviews (during which only Mr. Parvis and I were present) over a period of approximately four months. The first interview lasted 49 minutes, and the second 26 minutes. The first interview was conducted within two weeks of the start of the course; the second interview was conducted after the conclusion of the course. The quoted material presented here is derived from both interviews and is organized thematically, not chronologically.

The Carter High School teacher-participant in this study is James Parvis who has been teaching high school English for fifteen years. He teaches a one-semester twelfth grade course entitled, "Mythology." He has taught the course multiple times over the course of seven years, although he did not develop it originally. The course itself has been offered to students since Mr. Parvis joined the faculty at Carter High School, having been created by a teacher who has since retired from teaching.

Mr. Parvis obtained his undergraduate degree in English from Stonehill College in Massachusetts and his Master of Science in Education and his Sixth Year in Educational Leadership at Southern Connecticut State University. He has spent fourteen of his fifteen years as a teacher at Carter High School.

An intelligent, thoughtful teacher with a dry sense of humor, Mr. Parvis readily admits that *mythology is what hooked [him] as a child on Story*, that *mythology and science fiction are what made [him] into an English teacher*. He most enjoys *the idea of storytelling*, explaining that *fiction is more powerful than fact because fiction teaches you how to live your life*, whereas *a fact can't do that*. *What's important is the story*, he says, *not if we can try to substantiate it with facts*. He wanted desperately to teach the Mythology course because of his childhood love of fantasy and mythology, a love that seemed to grow from his appreciation of compelling characters and the profundity of

the story as much as the unusual elements inherent in such texts. For Mr. Parvis, fantasy was a kind of gateway to more “serious” literature, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1885) and *Death of a Salesman* (Miller, 1949). He sees a connection between these novels and those of the fantasy genre, noting that *in terms of character, story, it’s still there. That’s what the basis of all literature is, these stories that we tell and re-tell.* He looks for texts that have an *epic quality* to them, such as *The Grapes of Wrath* (Steinbeck, 1939); books to which the students *connect really well, especially with the outsider in society*, like *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1818); and books that are a *little off-kilter, where...it’s a little bit different*, like *The Stranger* (Camus, 1942).

In his approach to teaching, Mr. Parvis tries *first to get a strong engagement with the students*, to help them find *some aspect of a story that they can connect to, whether it’s a character, an idea, a connection to their lives.* It is his enthusiasm, he suggests, that helps students engage with the literature: *In my career, I haven’t had to teach a novel or a story that I really didn’t like*, he notes. He *likes to promote [a new book] to [the students] and starts by reading it [aloud] in class and setting it up for them, giving them some background information, telling them what type of story it is—what is this story really about, in general?* He tries to *hook them in that way and appeal to their sensibilities as people.* With fantasy, *you can sort of trick some kids...into reading, into being interested in a story* with the benefit that you can ask students *similar questions that you would do with any novel...It just comes in a different package.*

Interestingly, Mr. Parvis has observed and commented upon gender differences in reading and reading fantasy, noting that *there’s this social stigma with reading for boys that’s not there with girls for the most part. I think we certainly appeal to that with the Science Fiction course. The people I see walking around with fantasy books...are more of the girls. I think there’s some sort of gender divide there.* Mr.

Parvis's observations corroborate with those of the other two teachers in this study, though their speculations as to the root cause of this phenomenon vary. Mr. Parvis, for example, posits that *just maybe by chance [the girls are] discovering these [fantasy] genres more so than the guys just because they're exposed to a lot of different stories.*

When asked about critical literacy, Mr. Parvis considers the concept in broad terms, such as *being able to read, respond, and think, and that's the key part: think...*[Those are] *the skills we want them to walk out with, being able to read and write and think—on their own.* To that end, Mr. Parvis tries to *boil down the essence of a story and the theme and motifs, to discuss the relationship between characters in order to uncover what is important in there and what is not important: What does the student need to think about?...What are the motifs? What are the themes? What are the connections between the characters?* He works to take off the overlay of fantasy and look at the story beneath. For him, *mythology is not about the meaning of life; it's about the experience of life,* an idea he tries to emphasize to his students.

Course overview: “Mythology”

Mr. Parvis has taught critical literacy skills through several different works of fantasy, including traditional fantasy works such as *Mythago Wood* (Holdstock, 1984) and *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Tolkien, 1954), magical realism novels such as *Bless Me, Ultima* (Anaya, 1972) and *100 Years of Solitude* (Marquez, 1967), and classical works such as *The Divine Comedy: Inferno* (Alighieri, c. 14th century), though he now uses predominantly shorter mythological stories from various cultures such as ancient Greece and Rome, the Icelandic peoples, and the Egyptians. Throughout much of the course, the students read and analyze mythology *from two basic levels: story...and humanity (i.e., culture).* Mr. Parvis emphasizes *close reading skills in terms of story and cultural meaning.*

He has also developed a significant project that *takes up probably half of the semester* in which the students are expected to examine a single work of fiction *through the lens of research and analysis that is used for mythology*, examining such as aspects as gender roles, cultural commentary, or social class—all of which are aspects of critical literacy. His standards are high, and he requires that the students develop *an arguable thesis, ...have a knowledge of the topic, provide their evidence to the class, and ...defend it as well*. The project requires that students examine a significant text (*e.g.*, a novel or film, or a series of novels or films) and analyze it in an eight- to ten-page essay. They are also required to present their analyses in a full class period (*i.e.*, forty-six minutes) during which they are also expected to answer questions from the other students in class and from the teacher. In the accompanying essays, students are required to *comment on our culture, times, and society as well as the work itself*, thus rooting the analysis in critical literacy theory.

Students are not required to select works of fantasy to analyze, despite the mythological foundation of the course, but the analysis of such works *is not only encouraged, but it often becomes the focus of the class*, and connections between and among these works is developed throughout the Mythology course. For Mr. Parvis, fantasy has a foundation in literary history and has *a mythological basis. It has a world populated by gods, heroes, the traditional castles, and tales of knights and such...* Such stories use such *standard mythological types (i.e., archetypes) as the hero, the wizard, the trickster, [and] all those types that go along with mythology*. Whereas *science fiction is more fact-based, fantasy has more from the realm of myth and fairy tale*.

While novels with *those fantasy elements...tend to hook some students who might not be as motivated to read a standard novel, ...the problem with some of the fantasy literature is that it's...just so lengthy which for a reluctant reader is sometimes daunting*. Beyond this idea, fantasy texts tend to be published as a *series of books*, and

Mr. Parvis notes that reading only one such book in class tends not to be definitive enough for students' tastes. Furthermore, works of fantasy *can sometimes turn off readers who might not be fans of the genre or who might not be able to see beyond those details*. Mr. Parvis also notes that occasionally *there is some resistance to the overtones and the questioning about religion, though it's pretty rare* and has never been a problem, according to Mr. Parvis. He recalls a conversation with his former administrator regarding a perception among students that the Mythology class was easy (this perception, according to Mr. Parvis, was endemic before he began to teach the class), but once he took over the class, he decided that he was *going to really do this [mythological study] the right way*. When his administrator *saw the connections with some of the students who he'd see in his office to discipline with a book in their hand*, his perceptions toward the class were altered.

Mr. Parvis capitalizes on the preconceptions students have toward fantasy books that have *been sort of ingrained: anything that's not a 'real' story (i.e., rooted in realism and verisimilitude) is not something that you read, especially in school. I like to break that barrier...to hook the kids* to read the texts, he notes. He feels that the students respond well to fantasy works in school, especially *when a teacher is up in front of them telling them that it's okay to read this stuff. Regardless of the students' [intellectual] developmental levels, ...they all respond to the story elements: the story about the hero, the story about the trickster because that's something else that's ingrained in us, that's why we keep telling these stories*. Although the students may have read these stories when they were younger, as Mr. Parvis admits he did, *now they read these stories...on a whole different level, in a whole different aspect than as a third grader. They're richer, they have more depth to them, there's more that they can learn about themselves or life through these stories*. When the students are younger, Mr. Parvis notes, they are hooked because the stories contain *super-powerful beings [who]*

fight monsters and [have] great adventures. They also enjoy that aspect of being able to go back to their past, an idea which recalls and corroborates Tolkien's concept of nostalgia. Mr. Parvis notes an additional benefit offered by fantasy: Those students who are hooked through the class or are predisposed toward fantasy will try harder sometimes if [the text] appeals to them. They don't even realize that they're doing more than they would have done previously with an average text, allowing him to get more out of his students.

Mr. Parvis's Mythology class is comprised entirely of seniors. It is an honors-level course, and the students who enroll in it have *a higher level of interest and engagement* with the literature. *But when it comes to fantasy literature, which many of them read consistently outside of class, they are true fans and advocates.*

As mentioned above, Mr. Parvis devotes a significant portion of his Mythology class to the preparation and presentation—in writing and orally—of a close reading and analysis of a text through the lens of mythology. Because this project is intended to be a summative presentation of the critical literacy and analytical skills the students have accumulated throughout the course, this project will form the basis of the observations in Mr. Parvis's class. The student presentations and essays themselves answer the main thesis question of this research—*To what extent can critical literacy skills be taught through fantasy literature?*—and as such must be examined closely. Three oral presentations (including the question-and-answer period that followed each presentation) and two written essays were analyzed in detail, and the critical literacy skills demonstrated by the presenters, audience members, and essayists will be assessed against the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric.

Lesson observation #1: Introduction to the Mythology course

The first observation occurred at the start of the course—it was the first class meeting—and introduced the course objectives, provided an overview of the syllabus, and discussed the semester-long cumulative project at length, including the project expectations and scope. As it was an introductory lesson, Mr. Parvis provided a lot of information to the students, rather than engage them in critical thinking activities since the students had not yet encountered a text in the course. The excerpts presented here pertain largely to the project expectations and will be discussed in terms of critical literacy.

Mr. Parvis began class by reading through his syllabus with the students and explaining some of the salient features of the course of study in mythology: *Students will explore and analyze myths from three different perspectives: myth as literature (or pre-literature), myth as a glimpse into a culture's ideas and values, and myth as a commentary on the human experience.* The first perspective addressed traditional literary studies; the second perspective addressed critical literacy by connecting mythology to the dominant cultural discourse as well as the voices represented through myth; and the third perspective addressed critical literacy through providing an opportunity for self-reflection and to explore the complexity of issues and themes present in the texts. Therefore, to the extent that each of these elements is addressed through the study of the literature, this course is aligned with the theory of critical literacy.

Later in the class, Mr. Parvis discussed the specific requirements for the major essay project which he identified as *a critical examination of a well-loved story in a new, different way.* This overarching expectation is aligned with critical literacy theory because it addresses the idea of disrupting the commonplace by articulating alternate ways the text can be interpreted. Though the students' interpretations may not

necessarily be *resistant* readings, they are clearly required to be *original* readings of the text.

Mr. Parvis continued his discussion of the essay, saying that the students' *critical examination of a modern work is informed and inspired by the types of analysis we apply to mythology in the class, those close reading skills*. As an example of what he meant, Mr. Parvis identified the character of Superman. Rather than drawing connections between the characters of Superman and Hercules, he told students to *examine Superman and say something about him as a character and what we see him as in this culture*. By directing the students in this way, Mr. Parvis made clear connections between his previously-identified course objectives—which were aligned with critical literacy theory—and the expectations for the essay, connecting those expectations explicitly with the aspects of critical literacy that recognize the dominant cultural discourse and/or the voices represented in the text.

In discussing the presentation aspect of the project, Mr. Parvis explained that the presentation was an opportunity for students to *highlight the work and enlighten your classmates as far as your key points and observations, ...presenting your ideas from your essay to our whole group*. Following the presentation, *we switch to questions and answers* in which the student is *going to try to sort of defend your opinion* to the class, responding to questions using his or her knowledge of the subject. In this way, the presentation would accomplish similar goals as the essay, so the connection to critical literacy is comparable though the medium of transmission is different. The presentation adds the element of questions and answers which provides an opportunity for students to think on their feet and for the audience members to demonstrate their attentiveness, curiosity, and critical thinking skills since they will be responding to the critical literacy elements around which the presentation revolves.

Because of the explicit connection to critical literacy theory in both the presentation and the essay, and because the difference in media through which the information is transmitted provides an additional facet through which the data can be analyzed, both aspects of this culminating project provide an ideal snapshot of the critical literacy skills being developed in the class. Three student presentations and two essays were analyzed for evidence of critical literacy skills.

Lesson observation #2: Student analysis of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971)

This film is an adaptation of the novel *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Dahl, 1964). In the film, young Charlie Bucket, a poverty-stricken child approximately twelve years old, found a special Golden Ticket hidden inside a chocolate bar which enabled him to enter Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory, a secret magical factory where delicious confections are created. Charlie, along with four other children, toured the factory along with one relative each, sampling the candies and experiencing the wonders along the way. During the tour, each of the children misbehaved and was removed from the tour, except for Charlie who recovered from a mishap and was able to continue. After the other four children left the tour, Charlie was abruptly dismissed by Willy Wonka. When Charlie complained, he was admonished by Wonka for misbehaving. A remorseful Charlie subsequently returned a gobstopper to Wonka who informed him that he "won" the grand prize since the gobstopper represented a test of the children's morality as each child was tempted to sell the candy to a competitor of Wonka's. As a reward for his honesty, Charlie became the "heir apparent" of the candy maker and will assume operation of the factory when Wonka retires.

In her analysis of the film, Samantha identified her thesis *that the four children [who accompanied Charlie on the tour]—Augustus, Violet, Veruca, and Mike—do not*

learn from their experience in the chocolate factory at the end of the movie. She noted that, in the film, Willy Wonka observed that the children were going to return home and *'hopefully they're going to be a little wiser.'* In disagreeing with this position, Samantha disrupted the commonplace interpretation that, if one takes the character at his word, the children will change their behaviors and personalities. Samantha explained that the children *suffer from these personality defects....Because [the defects] are so strong, and [the children] are so immersed in themselves, they will not learn from this experience.* This was an unusual perception since literature is often predicated upon the concept that characters learn, change, and grow through their experiences.

However, Samantha noted that Charlie *doesn't really have a personality defect...so I think that he changes a little bit* as a result of his experience in the factory. She established a strong contrast between Charlie and the other children by positing that *Augustus, Violet, Veruca, and Mike are very ambitious characters. Ambition, I don't think, is a bad thing, but...they have too much of it, it's too concentrated, it's made them 'polluted' in a way. Now they're kind of stuck in this phase....[They] are almost blinded by this ambition.* This interpretation added complexity to an understanding of the characters since a reader might easily accept those characters as defined by the controlling characteristic Dahl ascribed to them. By drawing upon the similarities among the characters and identifying them as “ambitious” (though her use of the word is never clarified), Samantha moved past a superficial interpretation of the text and added complexity through a deeper understanding.

She developed her idea through a discussion of each of the characters, beginning with Augustus Gloop whom she identified as *a glutton practically*, supporting this interpretation through a film clip showing the young boy wolfing down a huge meal and answering questions with his mouth full. She distinguished the problem Augustus had from the other children by noting that his was a physical defect, while the other children

had defects in their *mindsets*. As the children were eliminated from the factory tour, Samantha noted, they did not learn from their experiences because *they do not really analyze the situation, and they don't realize that they are kind of the same person [as the one who was just eliminated], and they are making the same mistake over and over again. They never fully analyze their mistake.* This analysis supported her primary thesis.

Samantha then discussed Veruca Salt, a spoiled girl who *gets everything she wants, but she's so convinced that she really doesn't get everything she wants [that] it's like that blindness that they all have. It blinds [her] from seeing that she really does get everything she wants.* In addition to this insight, Samantha posited that Veruca was so used to getting everything she wanted that she *expects everyone to adapt to her....She wants the factory almost to change for her, instead of her changing for the factory.* A one-dimensional interpretation of her might conclude that she was simply a spoiled brat and that her covetous nature causes her ruin. But the “blindness” Samantha ascribed to Veruca added a complexity to her character that was easy to overlook. In addition to that was her observation that Veruca refused to change for her environment, a point that underscored Samantha's thesis.

Samantha introduced Violet next, reiterating her interpretation that the characters were blinded by ambition by showing a film clip of Violet waving the Golden Ticket she found and bragging about besting her girlfriend in gum-chewing. Samantha noted that Violet *just wants the ticket to show off to her friends....Because of that....she doesn't appreciate [her experiences in the factory] as much as she should,* which provided support for her thesis.

She contrasted Charlie's desire to find a Golden Ticket and his appreciation of it with that of Mike Teavee and his seeming unconcern as he watched television while being interviewed. According to Samantha, Mike was *focused on the TV; he just*

wanted [the Ticket] for the title, then he went back to just watching television again. In contrast, she observed that *when Charlie gets the Wonka bar, it's about everything, it's about the Wonka factory*. Through these observations, Samantha identified Mike as a “watcher” who refused to engage with life, and Charlie as a “doer” who embraced the experiences of life, although she did not articulate her perceptions in this way.

As the children progressed through the factory with Wonka, Samantha pointed out other negative attributes the children possessed, connecting them back to her thesis. She discussed the way the children bullied their parents as they signed a waiver, then pushed each other as they fought to be first down the stairway into the Candy Room: *They're dominating the parents, not listening to the parents....They don't respect Willy Wonka....They don't really show respect, and thus they don't really show appreciation*. This helped support her thesis since it demonstrated that the children were immune to adult reprimands—by those of their parents as well as Mr. Wonka himself.

Each child was eliminated from the tour, one by one: Augustus fell into a chocolate river because he was greedily drinking from it; Violet, against Wonka's advice, chewed a special gum that turned her into a giant blueberry; Veruca fell down a garbage chute after having a temper tantrum; and Mike became physically tiny after “televising” himself using the Wonkavision machine. Samantha interpreted these as evidence of a *contrapasso* (i.e., poetic justice): *everything they were focusing on that was taking away their attention while Willy Wonka was trying to warn them is the very thing that ends up eliminating them from the tour*. In considering Veruca's fall down the garbage chute, Samantha noted that *it was the most meaningful because...it's almost characterizing her as worthless because all these characters in here want something for nothing, ...[but] as a human being, our duty and our job is to work for things*. In this final comment, Samantha provided a symbolic interpretation of Veruca's removal from the tour, an idea that she connected to the larger human condition. In this way, she

considered how the text confirmed her perceptions of the way the world “works” and the role of humans in it, thus appropriating the message of the text.

Finally, during the question-and-answer session, Samantha was asked about the role the parents of the children took in the film. In her response, Samantha noted that *it's the parents* who were to blame for the children's behaviors and that they were just as close-minded as the children and therefore *they didn't really learn that much* in the factory. Charlie, on the other hand, was successful according to Samantha because *he didn't want to do anything wrong. He kind of learned from that not to always let your emotions control you, to do the right thing.* Through his success on the “quest” to complete the tour, Charlie demonstrated his capacity for learning. He recognized that he was not perfect and that he faltered on the path, but he was willing to accept the responsibility for his failing and to own his mistake in a way the other children refused.

Throughout her analysis of the film, Samantha provided appropriate, accurate, and sufficient evidence for her interpretations. She demonstrated an implicit understanding of critical literacy theory through her thesis that the children did not learn from their errors (*disrupting the commonplace*), her characterization of Veruca Salt not only as a spoiled brat but also as wanting the world to change for her rather than for her to adjust to the world (*problematizing the issue*), and through her discussion of the prominent role of the parents in the problem and her analysis of Veruca's mode of departure from the factory as being appropriate when one considers Veruca's perceptions of her role in the world (*self-reflection*). Therefore, Samantha exhibited *exemplary evidence* of critical literacy skills.

Lesson observation #3: Student analysis of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2007)

The second student presentation analyzed the film adaptation of the J.K. Rowling novel *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997). In the film, Harry Potter, whose parents died mysteriously at the hands of the evil wizard Voldemort who himself died in the encounter, was adopted and raised by his unpleasant and abusive aunt and uncle, two “Muggles” who highly disapproved of magic. When he turned eleven, Harry was accepted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry which he eagerly attended, to the consternation of his adoptive parents. At school, he made new friends (Ron and Hermione) and enemies (Draco), encountered adults both troublesome (Prof. Snape) and helpful (Hagrid), and learned about the world of magic and spellcraft. He learned of a plot involving the sorcerer's stone, an artifact that enabled its user to remain alive indefinitely or to return to life. Harry eventually discovered that Voldemort intended to use the stone to come back to life, but the plan was thwarted through bravery—Harry's own and that of his friends.

Angela analyzed the material, positing that *Harry could have never been as successful as he was without the help of Hermione: emotionally, intellectually, and magically*. Although she suggested that this was true throughout each of the books and films, her examples were all drawn from the first film since *it had the most clear examples [and] it's also where it all started*. Angela began her analysis by establishing Hermione's character and role in the story, identifying her as *bossy* but *helpful* by reminding Ron and Harry to *change into your robes* before arriving at Hogwarts and by repairing Harry's broken eyeglasses. According to Angela, *when [Hermione] fixed his glasses, it kind of represented taking away his old Muggle world when she takes off the tape, and replacing it with his new magical one*. She interpreted Hermione's bossiness as showing *her motherly instincts*, a theme Angela returned to later in her presentation.

Through her analysis, Angela demonstrated how Hermione was positioned in the text—as a complex mother-figure: simultaneously bossy and helpful. This addressed critical literacy theory by identifying the complexity of issues represented in the text and by identifying the multiplicity of voices represented, specifically the female voice as illustrated through Hermione.

Hermione's alienation from other students in the school was addressed when Ron noted that *it's no wonder she hasn't got any friends*. The film did not definitively explore why, though Ron suggested it was due to Hermione's overbearing and arrogant nature. Angela offered another reason, when she identified a connection between Hermione and Harry that was not explicitly addressed in the film: Hermione and Harry were both Muggle-born and thus endured a degree of alienation from the "true" wizarding world. She noted this when she showed a film clip of Hermione offering emotional support to a distraught Harry who had recently joined the quidditch team and was worried about his performance. Angela explained that *only Hermione could have helped him in this way because she also feels that she's left out, and she feels excluded because she was Muggle-born*.

Her next point addressed this issue from a different angle when Hermione enabled the escape of Harry, Ron, and herself from the Hogwarts caretaker by magically unlocking a door. Angela explained that Hermione *grew up as a Muggle, just like Harry did. But she can still do magic very well. This shows that Harry can also do that, too*. Not only did she reiterate the connection between Harry and Hermione, but Angela also speculated on Hermione's position as role model for Harry, demonstrating the possibility of successfully "crossing over" into the wizarding world from the non-magical world of Muggles.

Angela illustrated the intellectual assistance provided by Hermione through a scene in which Hermione recognized that a threatening three-headed dog the trio of

friends encountered was actually guarding a trapdoor. Angela explained that *Hermione is often able to see things that others might overlook, and she can notice all the little details....You may say that she has a woman's eye for detail.* Not only did this example illustrate Angela's primary thesis, but it also identified Hermione as representative of yet another "voice" in the text. In her first example, Angela defined Hermione as *motherly*; in another example, she defined Hermione as being a *fellow alien* who was somewhat unfamiliar with the wizarding world; and in this example, Angela described Hermione as *womanly* in her attention to detail. This complex view of Hermione—and the validation she received in the text through her powerful "voice"—represented a critically literate view of the text.

The validation of Hermione's voice was illustrated by Angela when she showed Hermione lighting Professor Snape's robe on fire in an effort to rescue Harry. Angela explained that *other people are noticing that something's happening to [Harry's] broom, but no one actually does something. [Hermione is] the only one willing to take charge of the situation and do something about the problem.* Thus, in recognizing the significance of Hermione's role in saving Harry, Angela identified the way the text validated Hermione's "voice."

Later in the film, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were frustrated in their library research for information regarding an elusive character: Nicholas Flamel. Angela pointed out a scene in which Hermione discovered Flamel's background. Angela explained that Hermione *intellectually helps* the boys and that she is represented as *the driving force behind the research* since *she is the one that found the information.* This insight into Hermione's character further positioned Hermione as "intellectual" in addition to the other roles Angela had already ascribed to her.

Following the presentation and defense of her thesis, Angela accepted questions from the other students. One of them asked, *Do you think Hermione would have had as*

big an influence on Harry if she were from a different House, like Slytherin? (Ricky).

By suggesting an alternate way the text can be viewed so as to question our interpretation of the text as it is presented, the student demonstrated the critical literacy concept of disrupting the commonplace through his question. This suggested that the student was attempting to view the text through a variety of lenses, questioning the decisions that the author made, and asking speculative questions about alternative texts. Angela responded negatively, explaining that Harry and Hermione *would [not] have been as good friends if that happened...since Slytherins are like the enemies of Gryffindors*. Angela's response suggested an understanding of the author's purpose in establishing the Gryffindor-Slytherin dichotomy, allowing her to re-envision the text critically.

In her presentation, Angela demonstrated that Hermione occupied a crucial role in the novel, helping Harry emotionally, intellectually, and magically, and that without her help, Harry would not have been successful. She also defined Hermione in a variety of ways: as mother, friend, intellectual, and fellow alien. Through her analysis, Angela examined the *complexity of issues and themes* in the text, problematizing Hermione's role; and she identified the multiple manifestations of the female *voice*, as illustrated through Hermione and being validated through her actions. Additionally, another student questioned the text by *disrupting the commonplace* interpretation to speculate on alternate ways to view the film.

On the other hand, Angela accepts the position Rowling puts the reader in and never questions it. Rowling wants the reader to see Hermione as a crucially-important motherly figure, but Angela does not question the ways in which Rowling undermines or contradicts that image. For example, Angela notes that Hermione is bossy, but in what ways is she nurturing or loving? Hermione is portrayed as intelligent and powerful, but in what ways is her portrayal a cliché or a stereotypical female? This

absence of a *disruption of the commonplace*, an important aspect of critical literacy, weakens her overall interpretation of the text because it neglects important points of tension in the novel. Thus, the variety of critical literacy aspects through which the text was analyzed, the depth of the discussion, and the support provided, mitigated by the absence of a critical view of Hermione's positioning by Rowling, suggest *significant evidence*³⁷ of critical literacy skills.

Lesson observation #4: Student analysis of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2004)

The third student presentation examined *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, Peter Jackson's (2004) film adaptation of *The Return of the King* (Tolkien, 1955). In this film, the third in the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, Frodo, the hobbit-protagonist of the films, and Sam, his hobbit-retainer, travelled into the land of Mordor to destroy the One Ring, a powerful artifact that belonged to the Dark Lord Sauron. The two hobbits, led by their wizened guide Gollum/Smeagol, traversed a secret pass over the mountains and into the Dark Lord's lands beyond, encountering—by malicious design of the treacherous Gollum—a huge Spider named Shelob along the way. The spider poisoned Frodo, but Sam drove it away. Thinking Frodo dead, Sam took the Ring for safekeeping. Orcs, evil creatures in Sauron's employ, captured Frodo who was not dead but merely unconscious, and took him to a tower where Sam eventually rescued him. The two continued their journey toward Mount Doom, a huge, fiery volcano into which they intended to hurl the Ring in order to destroy it. They were dogged by Gollum and hunted by orcs, but eventually they arrived at the gates of Mount Doom. Instead of throwing the Ring into the fire, Frodo, his will sapped by the Ring itself and his strength weakened by the journey, claimed it for his own. Gollum

³⁷ Initially, this analysis was given a rating of *exemplary* on the Rubric Scale, but following a discussion with the auditor, a rating of *satisfactory* was agreed upon, since the student's analysis seemed to lack sufficient depth and development to warrant a rating of *exemplary*, according to the auditor.

attacked Frodo and bit the Ring off his finger, but fell over the precipice and into the lava below, thus inadvertently fulfilling the Quest of the Ring. Frodo slipped over the edge of the precipice, caught himself, and was subsequently rescued by Sam³⁸.

The student, Kane, presented his thesis that *Sam plays the most significant role in the destruction of the Ring*. The student clarified his thesis by adding that *in the eyes of one who is not very familiar with the trilogy, Frodo looks like the character who has the most significance in the destruction of the Ring, ...but Sam is the most influential character in the movie in terms of the destruction of the Ring*. Kane even heightened Sam's heroism by explaining that *Sam may not be the strongest and fastest character Frodo could have chosen, but he did possess loyalty and determination...unparalleled by other characters*. In articulating an alternative interpretation of the text, the student *disrupted the commonplace* and introduced a resistant reading that placed a supporting character more firmly in the role of hero than the protagonist.

The first illustration of his thesis occurred just before the hobbits entered the Pass of Cirith Ungol, the secret pass into Mordor where, unbeknownst to them, Shelob waited to ambush them. The clip showed an exchange between Frodo and Sam in which Sam offered his portion of their meager meal to his friend, generosity which Frodo briefly questioned. Kane interpreted this to mean that Sam was *willing to sacrifice his own hunger to give to Frodo. But he also shows rationality because he knows that Frodo has to be strong in order to destroy the Ring. He's thinking ahead....He's kind of the brains of the operation*. Soon afterward, Frodo, tricked by Gollum's lies, dismissed Sam and sent him home, *but Sam, being the hero that he is, he doesn't leave...he realizes that he was to go save Frodo [from Gollum's treachery]*. In the following scene, Kane showed Sam challenging and even fighting Shelob in order to protect Frodo. Kane underscored this point by noting that Sam's actions were *unheard*

³⁸ Most of this film involved the adventures of other characters, but those are not related here since the student's presentation did not address them in any way.

of for a hobbit because they only live in the Shire...and they farm. They don't do [adventurous things] very much. Kane emphasized Sam's bravery in the face of such overwhelming odds (Shelob is bigger than a car), contrasting the enormity of Sam's aggression with the typical placidity of his home life, thus underscoring his thesis.

In his next piece of evidence, Kane analyzed a scene in which Sam ascended the slope of Mount Doom while carrying Frodo on his back: *I said before how [Sam] has the burden of Frodo. That was mentally before, but now you can physically see he has to carry Frodo, and that represents the burden he does have with Frodo.* In a final clip, as Frodo clung desperately to a precipice, Sam was shown grabbing Frodo's hand and pulling him to safety. Kane noted that *this is the last time in the movie where [Sam] really supports Frodo, and he's always there for him.* In his closing statement, Kane suggested that *the two key characteristics that make Sam play the most significant role in the movie is his loyalty to Frodo and his determination.*

Several of the questions asked by the audience members suggested influence by critical literacy theory. For example, the first student asked, *Do you think if Sam was the one who carried the Ring it would have turned out the same way as Frodo?* (Cheryl). The question itself disrupted the commonplace by suggesting an alternative way to view the text. Kane responded, *I think if Frodo was in Sam's position, I don't think he would have been able to do what Sam has done. I don't think he has that drive and determination.* While Kane may have been correct in his assertion, he provided no explanation or examples to warrant his claim, and no evidence of critical literacy skills.

The next student questioned the way the text addressed the dominant cultural discourse: *Do you think the sidekick role, where you see the sidekick is almost more powerful than the actual hero—do you think it's a more common thing today?* (Monica). Kane responded, *I think it is. A lot of times you see they provide a lot of support: a lot of mental support, a lot of physical support. Often, they go overlooked, but they really*

do have a lot of impact on the heroes. Again, his response lacked specificity and development—no examples or warrants—and thus *minimal evidence* of critical literacy skills.

Kane's thesis *disrupted the commonplace* interpretation of the film, and he provided a reasonable amount of evidence to support his claims. However, the evidence he provided was somewhat limited, bounded entirely by the third film and ignoring the first two in the trilogy (this may have been due to time constraints, since the class was shortened because of a scheduling change). His arguments left room for further development, and in responding to the questions of his classmates, he provided little evidence or development of his ideas. Finally, the scope of his thesis was narrow and he did not provide himself with opportunities to incorporate additional insights into the text, unlike the previous two student-presenters. Therefore, his overall presentation suggested *minimal evidence* of critical literacy skills.

Student essay analysis of the Disney film *The Lion King* (2011)

Although *The Lion King* (Minkoff & Allers, 2011) is a story about the interactions of animals in Africa, the film still meets the criteria for fantasy established in Chapter Three: It is a literary narrative set in a Secondary World (Africa) that incorporates an ontological separation from our own world in a way similar to the *Harry Potter* novels (*i.e.*, the world is recognizably ours, but the denizens are anthropomorphized animals capable of speech and logical thought) and has an internal consistency. There is little interest in verisimilitude (as a documentary might convey), and it incorporates supernatural creatures such as the mystic Rafiki (a mandrill). The culture of sentient animals lacks technological sophistication, and the story deals with archetypal imagery (*e.g.*, the wise old man, the father-figure, the hero, the trickster, the loyal retainer, and the goddess).

The film centered on Simba, a young lion whose father Mufasa was king of the other animals. When Mufasa was killed by Simba's uncle Scar, Simba was driven out from the animal culture and forced to fend for himself. He encountered two animals in the wilderness—Timon and Pumbaa—who befriended the young lion and taught him to live a carefree life away from society, forgetting his past and all his father taught him. Eventually, Rafiki, the wise shaman, found Simba and reminded him of his father's teachings, revealing in the clouds an image of his father who told Simba that he was to take his place as ruler of the other animals. Simba returned to the Pride Lands and confronted Scar, defeating him twice in combat but sparing his life each time. Scar was eventually killed by his hyena allies whom he had tried to betray to save himself. Simba, free of antagonists, took his place as ruler of the Pride Lands.

Jason's analytical essay interpreted the film as a *story about the growth into our adulthood* that answers the question, *How does one grow up and become an adult?* The choices in lifestyle available to Simba, according to Jason, *embody themselves as people who try to impose their guidance on him*, from Mufasa, Simba's regal father, to Scar, Simba's treacherous uncle. Jason characterized these influences as attempting either *to push Simba to grow and become a ruler like his father, [or to] push Simba away from growth...to remain adolescent and immature*. His thesis was clearly driven by critical literacy theory, specifically in his use of the text as a springboard for self-reflection to challenge or confirm readers' perceptions of themselves and their own ideologies (*i.e.*, how does the impact of others affect an individual's maturation?).

Mufasa, the first of these motivating forces, guided Simba from birth, teaching him to *face your responsibilities and problems head on*. His father's approval was so important to Simba, according to Jason, that Simba tried to justify a life-threatening action by saying only, *'I just wanted to be brave like you, Dad'*. Jason also pointed out a scene in which the young Simba stepped into his father's footprint, but found his own

foot too small to fill the large imprint of his father. According to Jason, this established that Simba *is not at the point of full growth* and thus malleable, able to be influenced by the other characters he encountered in his life. Soon after this scene, Mufasa died at the hands of Scar, and Simba, too young to be responsible for his own upbringing, had to rely on the guidance of others to reach maturity, as Jason noted. Mufasa's death created a void in Simba's life which cleared the way for representations of other philosophies of dealing with the challenges of maturation to manifest.

An important negative influence on Simba came from his uncle Scar who, after blaming Mufasa's death on Simba, counseled him *that running away from your problems is the only way to deal with them*, directly contrasting the advice of Mufasa. Simba was nearly killed by hyenas sent by Scar and was threatened that he would surely be killed if he ever returned. Because of this, Jason posited, Simba left *not by choice and guilt, but by fear*. Furthermore, Jason interpreted Simba's next near-death experience, which immediately followed his escape from the hyenas, as *not a punishment for his original decision to leave, but punishment for remaining away from the situation out of fear*. This subtle distinction was not fully supported by Jason, though he did explain that the fear and guilt Simba experienced were both presented negatively in the film through the adverse consequences of his actions.

Two other characters—Timon and Pumbaa—though they saved Simba from dying in the desert and appeared to be friendly with Simba were actually *hindering Simba's growth toward becoming like his father* because they taught him that '*when the world turns its back on you, you turn your back on the world*', a concept that was in direct contrast with the teachings of Mufasa, according to Jason. Timon and Pumbaa brought Simba to *a heaven-like world where troubles are a thing of the past*, but in doing so, they *metaphorically kill Simba...[and] motivate him to remain at his current immature level*, as Jason notes. He supported this interpretation by pointing out

examples of Simba's emotional stagnation and immaturity. The emotional torpor Simba experienced was straightforward enough, but Jason's interpretation of the influence of Timon and Pumbaa as a metaphorical death-and-heaven was complex since it incorporated an archetypal understanding of the work and connected the theme to a social/religious construct (*i.e.*, heaven) and commented upon its appropriateness in one's development, thus embedding his analysis in terms of critical literacy theory.

A final, more positive influence on Simba's growth arrived in the form of Rafiki, a shaman-like character who *sees the need to push Simba towards his growth after all of these years* by making him *conscious of the fact that the world that [Simba] currently resides in is not truly the physical world in which he wants to reside*. Jason pointed out several examples of Rafiki's ultimately-successful attempts to help Simba grow emotionally and resume his place in the world. Finally, Jason noted that *Rafiki leads [Simba] through the spiky underbrush, because it simulates a return through the same passage that allowed him to escape, showing Simba that only a reversal of his escape can bring his desired growth*. Again, Jason provided a symbolic interpretation of the event that was connected with emotional growth and maturity, an archetypal threshold that Simba had to cross to re-enter the adult world.

In his conclusion, Jason pointed out that the film teaches that *to be mature and an adult is to face your problems and past head-on, which allows you to learn from them and grow further*. He added an interesting complexity, though, when he noted that *without Rafiki's guidance from Simba's fantasy world, Simba would never have been able to realize his ultimate goal of growing into his father, and he would have been left with Mufasa's teachings, but with no way to convert them into fuel for his growth*. Not only did Jason note the thematic implications of the story—that emotional growth is a necessary part of life—but he also suggested the importance of mentors such as Mufasa and Rafiki in helping one to reach the appropriate level of maturity.

Jason implicitly recognized how the film *positioned* the viewer into accepting its teachings by articulating its underlying theme and noting several interwoven *complexities* that supported that theme. His comments on the necessity that one experience emotional growth and that this can be done only through embracing the past and learning from it, presented the film as a vehicle for *self-reflection* and analysis of one's own emotional growth. Jason provided sufficient development of, and support for, his ideas, often drawing subtle distinctions among interpretations as he refined his analysis. Given his deep engagement with the text, the connections he saw between this fantasy work and our own society, and the support he provided, Jason's analysis exhibited *exemplary evidence* of critical literacy skills.

Student essay analysis of the Dreamworks Animated film *Shrek* (2011)

The final student's (Scott) analysis concerned *Shrek* (Adamson & Jenson, 2011), a film whose protagonist is an anti-social ogre named Shrek. Shrek's forest home was being invaded by fairytale creatures (*e.g.*, Pinocchio, the Three Little Pigs, etc.), and he traveled to Duloc with his friend Donkey to ask the Lord Farquaad to restore his privacy. Farquaad agreed on the condition that Shrek rescue Princess Fiona, Farquaad's presumptive bride, from a castle guarded by Dragon, a condition that Shrek accepted. After rescuing Fiona, Shrek and Donkey accompanied her back to Duloc. Along the way, Shrek and Fiona slowly fell in love, though Shrek was insecure about his appearance, and Fiona was troubled by a curse which turned her into an ogress at night. After overhearing and subsequently misunderstanding Fiona's comments to Donkey (Shrek thought she was disgusted by him whereas she was actually bemoaning her cursed transformations), Shrek united Lord Farquaad with Fiona—much to the latter's displeasure—and returned to his swamp, breaking off his friendship with Donkey. Miserable in his loneliness, Shrek, at Donkey's urgings, flew to Duloc with Dragon and

Donkey and interrupted the wedding between Lord Farquaad and Fiona. The sun set, turning Fiona into an ogre which clarified Shrek's misunderstanding but enraged Farquaad who ordered Shrek killed and Fiona imprisoned. Dragon swooped in and devoured Farquaad, and Shrek kissed Fiona who remained "locked" in her ogress form, having been kissed by her true love. They all lived happily ever after.

Rather than interpret the film as a simple heroic journey with an ironic protagonist, or focusing on the theme that one's appearance matters more than it should, Scott analyzed the influence Donkey had in helping the monstrous Shrek *reveal his heroic personality*, calling Donkey *the most influential character in the movie*, despite being *cowardly, dramatic, and annoying*. According to Scott, Shrek's main problem was that *he is unable to develop any social skills so no one views him as a helpful member of society*. The underlying assumption behind Scott's thesis—a person is expected to engage with society as a productive member which necessitates the development of social skills—was rooted in critical literacy because of its articulation of the text's dominant cultural discourse (*i.e.*, engagement with society is crucial).

Donkey's most important character trait, according to Scott was his *upbeat attitude [that] has affected Shrek's antisocial attitude* to help bring him into society. Scott also pointed out that Donkey annoyed Shrek with his singing and that *their relationship contains an immense amount of conflict [which] is necessary in order for Donkey to gain the ability to influence Shrek*. The idea that conflict and stress causes growth is not new, nor is the role of the "Loyal Retainer" that Donkey fulfills. However, Scott provided sufficient evidence to support the idea that Donkey provided Shrek with help in the areas of social-emotional growth and completing the physical quests established for him (*e.g.*, Scott referred to Donkey's role in distracting Dragon which allowed Shrek to rescue Fiona).

Scott identified the archetypal roles Fiona played in the film, interpreting her as both Temptress, whose role is to distract the Hero from his Quest, and Goddess, who serves as the Hero's soul-mate. After Scott noted the unusualness of the dual role of Temptress-Goddess that Fiona plays, he linked it to the dual nature of her character in connection to her curse (*i.e.*, princess by day and ogress by night). Furthermore, Scott created meaning out of his observation in connection to his thesis by stating that, despite her dual role in Shrek's life, Fiona played a lesser role in Shrek's development than did Donkey since he (Donkey) was the instigator of their relationship in the first place. For example, Scott pointed out the conversation between Donkey and Shrek in which they discussed that appearances were not what they seemed, a conversation overheard by Fiona. Scott noted that *Donkey is the only character who is able to get Shrek to talk about such topics as this and it reveals a lot about Shrek's sensitive side and why he wants to live alone....It is because of the constant prying into Shrek's [personality] layers by Donkey that Fiona and Shrek are able to have a romantic relationship.* Scott connected these complex ideas—Fiona's dual role in Shrek's life and the impact of Donkey's prying nature on Shrek—to conclude that *it is because of Donkey that [Fiona's] ogre half is able to become Shrek's goddess.* Through this interpretation, not only did Scott note additional complexities in the themes of the text, he also disrupted the commonplace interpretation that it was Fiona who had a greater influence on Shrek by instead pointing out Donkey's role as instigator of their relationship.

A final task that Donkey undertook, as Scott pointed out, was to help motivate Shrek to leave the swamp where he had retreated after his misunderstanding with Fiona in order to stop her wedding with Lord Farquaad. During this exchange, Donkey became uncharacteristically angry with Shrek, *forcing [Shrek] to face the reality that he has been cruel and does not appreciate him or Fiona.* Throughout his analysis, Scott pointed out the various types of assistance Donkey provided Shrek, including helping

him emotionally, physically, and socially: *Donkey plays the role of mentor, loyal sidekick, and advisor as he provides Shrek with the help every hero needs.*

Scott concluded that *without Donkey to help peel away the layers of his 'ogre onion' Shrek would never have been able to fall in love with Fiona and return to stop the marriage.* In this way, Scott identified the complex assistance Donkey provided for Shrek, and in doing so *problematized* the story by moving beyond an interpretation of it as a Hero Quest and developing the theme beyond the idea that reality matters more than superficial appearances. The confirmation of his thesis also validated his initial underlying assumption that integration into society and making interpersonal connections are critical for the complete development of the individual. He provided sufficient evidence to support his ideas, and showed an implicit understanding of critical literacy theory in the development of his ideas. Therefore, Scott's analysis exhibited *exemplary evidence* of critical literacy skills.

Summary: Case Study C

In his Mythology course, Mr. Parvis explores stories of myth and literature through multiple lenses: myth as literature, myth as cultural discourse, and myth as an exploration of the human experience. The latter two lenses are firmly founded in critical literacy theory. The culminating course project Mr. Parvis assigns the students involves an independent analysis of a text through those lenses. Therefore, this final project is grounded in critical literacy theory and affords sufficient opportunity for students to exhibit the associated skills.

The introductory classroom observation was recorded on the first day of class and provided an overview of the course itself as well as the final culminating project for which the students were responsible. Three other classroom observations focused on student presentations of their final project. These, as well as two student essays that

addressed the same culminating project, were analyzed in terms of the primary research question and assessed on the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric. Each student analyzed a different text, though all were films.

Generally speaking, the students provided numerous examples and details from the texts to support their theses, and their ideas were well-developed. Students incorporated multiple insights and addressed more than one aspect of critical literacy theory implicitly in their presentations and essays. One student—Kane—incorporated less elaboration and support for his ideas, and fewer insights into his subject than the other four students, though this may have occurred because he was afforded less time to present than the others, his presentation being scheduled on a day that had shorter class periods.

Overall, the data suggest that, when the students were given time to develop their skills and an opportunity to display them as they analyze a text with which they were intimately familiar, they were able to provide *exemplary evidence* of critical literacy skills. Overall, the preponderance of evidence suggests that in the Carter High School classroom *critical literacy skills can be developed to an exemplary level through fantasy literature*, as defined in the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric.

Student perspectives

Within each case study, three or four students were interviewed and asked their opinion of fantasy books in general. In all, ten students participated: three from Adams High School (all female), four from Butler (two male, two female), and three from Carter (two female, one male). In the case of Butler High School, the teacher received four volunteers and chose to submit all their names for interviews. All students who were interviewed had chosen to take the fantasy course in which they were enrolled (*i.e.*, none had been assigned to take class after registering for different ones). This is

significant in that the students were invested in the subject matter and/or teacher to some extent, and many had had experience reading works of fantasy prior to the course, some even with the works that were being read in their class at that time (e.g., *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* [Rowling, 1997]). After each interview, students received a written transcript and were asked to correct any errors, or to add or delete comments they had made. None took advantage of this opportunity. Interviews were conducted in public places with other adult staff members in the immediate vicinity, and all students seemed to take the interview seriously.

All students had positive comments regarding fantasy works in general, noting aspects of the genre that appealed to them. While their answers were varied, the most common theme that emerged was the sense of *escape from reality* that the novels created. Seven of ten students noted positively the aspect of escape inherent in fantasy fiction. Jaelyn from Adams High School noted that fantasy is *different from real life* which is appealing because *you can enter another world* through the text, an idea that David from Butler High School corroborated: *Imagining yourself in a different world...is almost therapeutic in a way*. This escape is something Tolkien noted in his essay "On Fairy-Stories" (1939) as being a crucial function of fantasy literature, and this element clearly resonates with these students.

In a closely-related comment, four of the seven students noted the feelings of nostalgia the stories created in them. For Christina at Butler High School, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997) *brings [her] back to easier days*, which is also true of Lindsey from Adams High School who said that reading fantasy *gives you a chance to be a kid again....I like to go back and read [fantasy] because it reminds me of when I was a child*. Clearly, texts that have the power to inspire such powerful feelings in readers offers advantages for educators in the classroom.

However, the idea of escape from reality and the feelings of nostalgia that fantasy may inspire are insufficient to warrant its incorporation into the curriculum: there must be substance as well. The students' perceptions support the idea of textual depth and complexity as well. As Samantha from Carter High School observes, *some people try to mitigate their value, [but] fantasy is just as important [as traditional literature]. People underestimate it.* She explains further: *Sometimes [fantasy texts] have a more real message than even ones that are based on real characters...Even though it might not seem like they're realistic physically, like with fairies, but the elements of them are still very based on human experiences.* Lindsey from Adams High School concurs: *Even though it's fantasy, [The Once and Future King] portrays the way people think very accurately....You feel the complexity of the people.* Three other students noted the way fantasy conveys a sense of verisimilitude toward human characteristics, and seven students noted specific connections between fantasy texts and the real world or to situations in their own lives, as illustrated through Angela's comment from Carter High School: *Fantasy is...interesting because even though it's not real, you can still connect it to different things, like your life. It's fun to read about.* Despite the enjoyment of reading fantasy in school, Lindsey from Adams High School warns that her fantasy course *sounds like an easy class, but it's really not*, suggesting that fantasy, a genre that, as Samantha noted above, is often *underestimated* by people, can pose challenges for the reader.

Angela was not alone in her comments about the enjoyment students experience when reading fantasy. Six of the ten students interviewed noted that fantasy was interesting or fun to read while still being educational, as David from Butler High School noted in his comments about fantasy: *I can learn about life lessons and be able to get the skills to read into a book and find those inner meanings while still being interested in the story itself....Fantasy books entertain you while still teaching you.*

These comments are important to note as they help to develop an emotional facet to this research which has largely been devoted to the intellectual value of fantasy texts.

Not only did these students validate the intellectual value of fantasy, but they also clearly responded positively to the emotional aspect of reading, an act that should bring joy to students but often falls short, as David suggested when he noted that *classes like this [fantasy] one are really beneficial [because] it offers a break from the everyday, boring thing, [and] it can really give people a reason to enjoy school*, thus encouraging students to be more motivated academically. Angela reiterated this theme when she said that she *learned a lot* from reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997) and that *it makes me want to pursue more in school and do well....It makes me want to do different things and learn about more things because it's so different*. For readers to whom fantasy appeals, the genre seems to offer tremendous benefits, according to the students.

Finally, when asked about the type of person who might enjoy fantasy literature, half the students interviewed observed that fantasy would appeal to readers who, according to Helena from Butler High School, are *on the creative side*. Christina from Butler also notes that fans of fantasy literature tend to be *more open-minded and have an imagination*. For Angela at Carter High School, fantasy would appeal to *someone that's a little different...not a mainstream, narrow thinker. You have to be able to open your mind to different things*. This "openness" seems to originate from the fact that fantasy tends not to dwell in the reality that most readers are familiar with but in other worlds, in other times, and regarding other creatures that have no real-world antecedents. For concrete thinkers and readers who are firmly ensconced in reality, the students suggest, fantasy may have little appeal.

Summary

This chapter examined the practices of three teachers working in different districts. The teacher in Case Study A was a ten-year veteran who worked in a medium-sized suburban district. The teacher in Case Study B was a third-year teacher in a small rural district. The teacher in Case Study C was a fifteen-year veteran teaching in a large rural school. The three teachers approached teaching in different ways, though two incorporated a great deal of large-class discussion. The composition of the classes varied as well, with two being heterogeneous groupings, and the third a more homogenous Honors-level class. Class sizes ranged from nine to sixteen to twenty-five students. In total, the three case studies offered a wide range of educational environments, texts, and student work.

The student work and classroom conversations that were analyzed displayed critical literacy skills that ranged from almost no evidence to exemplary evidence, according to the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric. Case Studies B and C contained more examples of *significant* and *exemplary evidence* of critical literacy skills than Case Study A, but *the preponderance of data suggest the possibility of developing critical literacy skills to an exemplary level using fantasy literature*. Student perspectives gleaned through interviews affirmed the value and appeal of fantasy literature as both an intellectual challenge and as a motivator for students. While Chapter Seven examined each case study individually and in detail, Chapter Eight will summarize the data and answer each of the research sub-questions, as well as the primary research question, using the data from the case studies.

Chapter Eight: Conclusions

The previous chapter was devoted to a discussion of each of the three case studies examined in this research project. Gathered data were presented and analyzed in the context of the larger units of study within each case and in the context of the primary research question. Demographic data was provided to develop a fuller picture of each district. The data were analyzed in terms of the research questions, and student work and classroom discussions were assessed against the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric and qualitatively using elements of content analysis. Both methods were discussed in detail in Chapter Six. This chapter will provide a brief summary of the data analysis from Chapter Seven, then answer each of the research sub-questions in terms of the data gathered from the case studies, and finally answer the primary research question.

Data summary

The three case studies examined a variety of texts, two of which—*The Once and Future King* (White, 1958) and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997)—were print texts studied formally in their respective classrooms, while the others—*Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (2011), *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2007), *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2004), *The Lion King* (2011), and *Shrek* (2011)—were films analyzed by students. This variety benefits the research project because the diversity of subjects and media helps to enlarge the scope of the conclusions. With the exception of the White text which was published in 1958, the texts were produced within the past fifteen years of the writing of this document, though *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2004) and *Willy*

Wonka and the Chocolate Factory (2011) were adaptations of previously-published books written in 1955 and 1964, respectively.

Overall, the three cases offered a broad range of students with varied academic abilities, were situated in both rural and suburban districts of various sizes (*i.e.*, small to large), involved male and female teachers with teaching experience ranging from three to fifteen years, provided opportunities to analyze both spontaneous, verbal responses in a classroom setting and more considered responses in both essay and verbal format. The texts were both written and visual and represented a range of sub-genres within the larger fantasy genre. The diversity of elements incorporated in just these three cases enhances the degree of transferability of the conclusions, thus improving the trustworthiness of the research project.

Research sub-questions answered

The primary research question that drives this thesis is, *To what extent can critical literacy skills be taught through the use of fantasy literature?* Each of the following sub-questions was derived from the primary question, and each was discussed in Chapter One. Each sub-question will be answered below in terms of the data analyses:

- What is critical literacy, and what are its key elements?
- What is fantasy literature? How is it defined?
- What elements of critical literacy are demonstrated in fantasy literature?
- What are the most appropriate methods for such an examination?
- Which high schools in Connecticut will be selected for study and why?
- How are critical literacy skills successfully taught?
- What factors within the case studies being examined impact the successful teaching of critical literacy through fantasy literature?

- What are some of the benefits and detriments of using fantasy literature as a vehicle to engender critical literacy skills?

What is critical literacy, and what are its key elements?

Critical literacy embodies an approach toward reading that emphasizes the political nature of the text. Educators who embrace critical literacy question the values represented in the text and whose interests are served in the classroom, addressing social oppression and inequities as they relate to class, race, and gender. Such “critical educators” examine texts in a variety of ways, helping students uncover the hidden agenda(s) inherent in every text and, by doing so, disrupt its intended message, thus empowering the students through literacy.

Critically literate readers examine a text by identifying the *dominant cultural discourse* represented within a text to uncover the “hidden agenda” that drives the discourse; identifying the diversity or uniformity of *voices* represented in the text, focusing on which voices are privileged and which are marginalized; articulate the *complexity of issues and themes* explored by the text and problematize those issues presented one-dimensionally by the text; *disrupt the commonplace* by articulating alternate ways the text can be envisioned in order to yield multiple or resistant readings; and use the text as a springboard for self-reflection, leading toward self-improvement and the *promotion of social justice*.

What is fantasy literature? How is it defined?

The following definition of fantasy literature, as defined on page 53 above, was used in this research project: Fantasy literature is a type of literary narrative or poem that incorporates a Secondary World that has an ontological separation from our own world, and has an internal consistency. Unlike realism, fantasy has limited interest in

verisimilitude, often incorporating such elements as monsters or supernatural creatures (*e.g.*, dragons, centaurs, goblins, minotaurs, etc.), mythic demi-human species (*e.g.*, elves, dwarves, fairies, giants, etc.), magical items, and magic spells. The cultures that populate the Secondary World generally lack technological sophistication and usually reside in a medieval setting. Fantasy works often deal with archetypal images, mythic structures, and the struggle between Good and Evil. Each of the texts employed in the case studies meets the criteria established by this definition.

What elements of critical literacy are demonstrated in fantasy literature?

Five key questions of critical literacy, as they relate to the study of literature, are identified and discussed in Chapter Two (see Fig. 1, p. 63). These aspects are identified in the table below along with the extent to which each question is addressed according to the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric (see Fig. 2, p. 161), as well as the medium of its exhibition, by the students in each case study:

Figure 3: Aspects of critical literacy addressed in each case study

	Case Study A: Adams HS	Case Study B: Berger HS	Case Study C: Carter HS
	Text: <i>The Once and Future King</i> (White, 1958)	Text: <i>Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone</i> (Rowling, 1997)	Texts (films): <i>Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory</i> , <i>Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone</i> , <i>The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King</i> , <i>The Lion King</i> , and <i>Shrek</i>
Dominant cultural discourse identified		Exemplary (in class) Significant (in class) Significant (in class) Exemplary (in class)	Exemplary (written)
Voices represented			Exemplary (presentation)
Issues and themes explored and problematized	Minimal (in class) Minimal (in class) Significant (in class) Significant (in class) Minimal (in class) Significant (written) Significant (written)	Significant (in class) Significant (in class) Significant (in class) Exemplary (in class) Exemplary (in class) Significant (written) Minimal (written) Minimal (written) Significant (written)	Exemplary (presentation) Exemplary (presentation) Exemplary (written) Exemplary (written)
Disrupting of the commonplace	Significant (in class)	Exemplary (in class)	Exemplary (presentation) Significant (presentation) Minimal (presentation)
Self-reflection/ Promoting social justice	Minimal (in class) Minimal (in class)	Exemplary (in class) Significant (in class)	Exemplary (presentation) Exemplary (written)
Overall assessment	Significant	Exemplary	Exemplary

What are the most appropriate methods for such an examination?

A qualitative methodology using a case study design was deemed most appropriate to answer the primary research question. Previous studies that addressed research questions similar to this thesis were examined and provided guidance in the approach for this project. A greater premium was placed on studies that examined the development of critical literacy skills rather than those that examined the teaching of fantasy literature in high school classrooms for two reasons: First, the literature that addressed the use of fantasy in high school classrooms lacked the rigor of formal research and were instead informal articles that provided suggestions based on the experiences of the teacher/writer. Second, the development and manifestation of critical literacy skills in students was considered a more significant element since it involved a pedagogical approach rather than fantasy literature which was the subject matter.

Which high schools in Connecticut were selected for study and why?

Schools were selected based upon opportunity sampling. At the time the research was beginning, few high schools (*i.e.*, seven of 137) had written curriculums that included a class devoted to fantasy literature. Each of those seven schools was contacted, and three teachers agreed to participate in the study: two suburban schools and one rural school. These schools represented a mix of sizes: a small suburban school of approximately 560 students, a medium-sized suburban school of approximately 970 students, and a large rural school with an approximate population of 2,150 students.

How are critical literacy skills successfully taught?

The teachers in each of the first two case studies used a similar approach to the teaching of critical literacy skills: Each teacher assigned students to read a selection of the text, then placed students into small groups and provided one or more questions related to the reading. A whole-class discussion followed in which the questions were answered and related issues explored. In Case Study A, students were encouraged to make connections between themselves and the text, or between the world and the text. The teacher, Miss Jameson, modeled the appropriate type of response but accounted for a significant amount of the conversation in class. Students generally participated in the discussions, but their answers were less well developed, and the teacher bore the burden of carrying the discussion. In her class, students tended to address the key questions of critical literacy in a minimal way, largely because they lacked evidence and development of their ideas.

In contrast, Mr. Berger in Case Study B relied much more on a Socratic approach, asking students follow-up questions when their answers seemed to want development, though he did re-state their ideas as a means of clarification. The students

in his class developed their answers more fully than in Miss Jameson's and provided more support for their ideas. As a result, Mr. Berger's students were able to address the key questions of critical literacy in a significant to exemplary way in class. Thus, both teachers employed Socratic-style class discussions that were held after students had an opportunity to read the text and answer questions about it in small groups. The primary difference between their methods was the type and amount of teacher participation during the class. The results would suggest that teachers who participate less in answering the questions and in *extensive* modeling of the expected behavior, and instead require students to participate more fully in class and push them to provide more support for their ideas seem to have greater success in developing critical literacy skills in their students.

Mr. Parvis, in Case Study C, provided students with a challenging independent project that required them to use the skills they had developed throughout the course. His students achieved a high degree of success, generally addressing the key questions of critical literacy in an exemplary way through their written and oral projects. Thus, assigning students a challenging culminating project and providing them with ample support along the way, can enable students to develop key critical literacy skills. It must be noted, however, that Mr. Berger's class was comprised of homogeneously grouped, academically advanced students, while the students of Miss Jameson and Mr. Berger were heterogeneously grouped.

Still, the element in common among these three styles of teaching seems to be a reliance on the student to do the work of analysis, suggesting that, however one may introduce the concepts of critical literacy, students must be allowed (and, in some cases, required) to demonstrate their competence *on their own*. This seems to align with the precepts of critical literacy which is a literacy of empowerment of the individual.

What factors within the case studies being examined impact the successful teaching of critical literacy through fantasy literature?

One of the most significant factors that influences the successful teaching of critical literacy skills is the teacher's understanding of the term *critical literacy*. If a teacher's understanding of the term differs significantly from that of the researcher, or from other teachers in the study, the students may not learn the same skills. A knowledge of critical literacy was a prerequisite for teacher-subjects of this study, and all three teachers professed an understanding of the term. Each was asked for their definition during an interview and, while each definition varied to some degree, they were sufficiently similar to warrant their participation. A comparison of the teachers' definitions is taken up in the following chapter.

Another factor influencing success is the pedagogical approach of the teacher. While pedagogy was not a primary subject of this research, it was still significant to the study and was noted in the analyses. To the extent that the teacher's pedagogy was appropriate to the teacher's style, the subject matter, and the students, the teaching of critical literacy skills should also be successful. In the case studies examined, the teachers who placed the responsibility for learning on the shoulders of the students (*i.e.*, Cases B and C) saw the most success; that is, their students earned higher levels of achievement on the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric than students in Case A whose teacher did more of the "work" during class by responding to the questions she asked them.

A third factor involves the task and can be sub-divided into text and assessment(s). The text refers to the text the teacher uses to teach the skills. As noted in Chapter Four and in the discussions of each of the case studies, the texts being used are appropriately challenging and textually rich enough to warrant their incorporation into a high school curriculum. Additionally, the assessment(s) required by the teacher

can impact the study as well. Teachers who attempt to engender critical literacy skills in their students must allow their students opportunities to demonstrate their learning by assigning assessments that test critical literacy skills. Assessments that are too simple or that do not test critical literacy skills (*e.g.*, recall questions), or questions that are beyond the students' comprehension may produce limited results.

A fourth factor, closely related to the issue of task, impacting the successful teaching of critical literacy skills involves the students themselves. If they are ill-prepared to learn the skills or if they are intellectually unable to achieve the standards established by the teacher, then they may not find success in the classroom. The students in all three case studies were generally able to demonstrate critical literacy skills to a *significant* or *exemplary* degree as measured against the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric, suggesting that the assessments were appropriate to both the student and the unit objectives (*i.e.*, critical literacy skills), and that the students themselves were sufficiently prepared to learn the skills.

What are some of the benefits and detriments of using fantasy literature as a vehicle to engender critical literacy skills?

As has been demonstrated in each of the three case studies, fantasy literature can be used to help students develop critical literacy skills—often to a high degree. Teachers looking for ways to capitalize on the popularity of the genre should not be afraid to employ works of fantasy in high school classrooms, even at the highest grade levels and among the most academically-advanced students. The use of fantasy literature in the high school classroom can have many academic benefits, and teachers who wish to should confidently include it for the following reasons:

1. Many students enjoy reading fantasy literature

Considering the cultural popularity of fantasy novels which are among the best-selling novels of all time (Drout, 2006), teachers have an opportunity to capitalize on students' interests. *Students are getting more into fantasy; there's a revival of sorts* (Berger) which teachers can use to their advantage in the classroom. *Students look forward to reading [fantasy literature] in school* (Berger), *and if it gets the seal of approval from the authority in the classroom, it helps in terms of [the students] bringing down that wall* (Parvis) that inhibits them from reading such works that may be considered by some to lack literary significance.

2. Fantasy literature can help motivate students

One of the primary benefits of using fantasy literature to teach critical literacy skills is the motivating impact fantasy has on students. All three teacher-subjects noted that students often have positive memories associated with the reading of fantasy, memories that are not necessarily associated with other types of literature. Perhaps the students have read a specific book when they were younger (*e.g., Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* [Rowling, 1997]) or have grown up with the series as Miss Jameson and Mr. Berger both noted during their interviews, and the re-reading of a childhood favorite creates a sense of nostalgia in the students, an effect several students noted positively during their own interviews. As a result, *students who are into fantasy look forward to doing the reading* for class, noted Miss Jameson.

3. Fantasy literature challenges readers, despite perceptions that it is “children’s literature”

Le Guin (2006) argued that fantasy literature, while written with a youthful audience in mind, is not only for children and can be enjoyed by adults, too. The extensive evidence of critical literacy skills that has been shared in each of the case studies above identifies an important implication for her argument; namely, that in addition to reading fantasy literature for enjoyment, readers may also read them to help improve their critical reading skills and that, with its “children’s literature” label, fantasy has a sort of stealth impact, challenging readers to think creatively and imaginatively. Mr. Berger pointed out the benefit of developing classes around fantasy literature to take advantage of this phenomenon: the perception among student, he said, is that the reading and the work will be easy because the reading is seen as enjoyable. This observation is reiterated by Mr. Parvis, who said that a teacher can use fantasy works to *sort of trick some kids...into being interested in a story, then turning it around and asking similar questions that you would do with any novel in any study of literature*. Students, Mr. Berger noted, tend not to be afraid of, or intimidated by, fantasy despite the fact that, as Miss Jameson noted, fantasy tends to be more ambiguous than other types of fiction.

4. Fantasy literature has depth and complexity, not unlike traditional, mimetic literature

There may be little dispute regarding the complexity and depth of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), but the complex interpretations offered by the students in each of the case studies and the scholarly opinions of selected fantasy texts in Chapter Four suggest that fantasy novels also contain complex elements

and have a depth and texture not unlike traditional novels. The difficulty of reading such novels is belied by its popular perceptions, as noted above. Mr. Berger posited that in *well-written and well-done fantasy literature, we're seeing that there's more than just knights and swords and dragons and wizards and all those kinds of things* and that the students *will try harder sometimes if [the text] appeals to them....They don't even realize that they're doing more than they would have done previously with an average text* (Parvis). In *The Once and Future King* (White, 1958) for example, *there's so much going on in the story that [students] can take away* (Jameson), including a love story, battles, political intrigue, and other conflicts within the multi-faceted story. But beyond all the complexity lies the appeal of the story: *The literature itself creates, or helps [students] go back to that imaginative state to some extent. I think fantasy is very complex on the one hand, but on the other hand, if you to read it just for the sake of reading a good story, you can* (Jameson).

5. The popularity of fantasy film adaptations can inspire students to read

As Mr. Berger pointed out, the popularity of fantasy films can also help draw students to the genre. Since the year 2000, eleven of the twenty-five highest-grossing films in each year were based upon a fantasy work of literature (IMDB, 2012), including three based upon Tolkien's novels, seven based upon the novels of Rowling, and one based upon Carroll's (1865) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The popularity of these films can help create interest among students in reading the books on their own. This cultural popularity can benefit teachers who use fantasy literature in the classroom because *there's a resistance some students have toward reading books that they wouldn't pick up themselves*

(Berger), and teachers can capitalize on that to get students to engage with the literature in class.

However, teachers must also be concerned about the negative reactions students may have toward fantasy literature. As noted above, not all students enjoy fantasy literature, and for those who do not, the above benefits are disputable. Even among fans of fantasy literature, studying fantasy literature may prove troubling in the classroom for the following reasons:

1. Fantasy texts can have confusing literary conventions

Miss Jameson points out the difficulty of some fantasy texts for readers who are unfamiliar with the conventions of the genre or who have difficulty envisioning the strange settings or unique creatures that tend to populate fantasy texts.

Additionally, Mr. Berger points out the difficult-to-remember place-names and character names in fantasy as well as the complicated foreign histories that often play a role in such works. Such limitations to the use of fantasy in the class can be addressed or even overcome through the use of pre-reading activities, reading guides, and/or class discussions that address specific concerns of students. This particular feature of fantasy texts creates a more difficult reading experience for students, which in turn creates more opportunities for teachers to help students improve their reading skills.

2. Fantasy novels tend to be quite long

Another drawback to using fantasy in the classroom—noted by all three teacher-respondents—involves the sheer length of the novels which can amount to several hundred (or thousand) pages. Not only must teachers make some

difficult choices regarding which works of fantasy to include in their curriculums, they must also weigh the benefits of using them at all. *So many [works of fantasy] are part of a series* (Jameson) that to include all of them in a course may also prove impossible. Furthermore, to read only a selection of the series (*e.g.*, the first book in the sequence) may do a disservice to the story and the author: *Is it really fair to judge the author on what they are trying to do when you really haven't seen all that they've tried to do* (Berger) by reading the whole series? As Mr. Parvis pointed out, the first novel in a series may not be definitive enough to satisfy students who might have been expecting closure on the story. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to select shorter, stand-alone texts that are substantive enough to support classroom analysis. Alternatively, teachers may portray the study of fantasy as more of a survey course intended merely to introduce major themes and influential texts to students who are then encouraged to pursue their interests based upon their experiences with the texts presented in class.

3. Not all students inherently enjoy reading fantasy literature

Students who fall into this category may not be intrinsically motivated to read such works, undermining some of the most important reasons for using fantasy literature. As with any literary text, a teacher must be mindful of the students' interests and attempt to take advantage of them to enhance student participation in class.

A final observation concerns the application of critical literacy theory to fantasy literature read in class. As demonstrated above, several aspects of critical literacy skills can be developed in students through the use of fantasy literature—even using the same

work of fantasy to develop a variety of skills. It is important for teachers to be mindful of their approach with fantasy works and to help students develop a variety of skills that are appropriate to the text being read to maximize the effectiveness of the instruction, but not to be afraid to attempt to teach critical literacy using fantasy literature just as they would employ traditional, mimetic literary works to teach such skills.

Primary research question: To what extent can critical literacy skills be taught through the use of fantasy literature?

Given the depth to which students have analyzed the works of fantasy represented in the results of the case studies discussed in Chapter Seven, and given the depth to which scholars have analyzed the works of fantasy explicated in Chapter Four—*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950); *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 1937); *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954, 1955); *A Wizard of Earthsea* (Le Guin, 1968); and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997)—it can be concluded that fantasy literature is an effective vehicle for educators to use to develop critical literacy skills in students due to its literary depth and richness, its aesthetic appeal to students, its popularity, and the level of challenge it provides readers.

The development of critical literacy skills was varied among the students in the case studies, but not atypical for a literature classroom. Miss Jameson from Adams High School in Case A, in using *The Once and Future King* (White, 1958) to teach critical literacy skills, employed small-group work (*i.e.*, three or four students per group) to generate responses to questions and thereby facilitate whole-class discussion. She emphasized text-to-self and text-to-world connections in the ensuing discussions, modeling the expected behavior extensively for students and encouraging them to participate in the conversation. Her summative assessment for the unit asked the students to choose from among three essay topics from which to write their analysis of

the text. Her students predominantly produced *significant* evidence of critical literacy skills based on the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric.

Mr. Berger from Butler High School in Case B, used *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997) to teach critical literacy skills focused primarily around issues of morality. His classroom followed a pedagogical model similar to that of Miss Jameson, though he modeled the expected behavior less heavily and relied more on the students to carry the burden of the conversation and analysis. His questions focused more on the text itself rather than moving outside of it, and as a result his discussions with the students tended toward the philosophical rather than the pragmatic, as Miss Jameson's did. His summative assessment of the novel asked students to analyze the novel in one of two ways: from a moral perspective, in which students were asked to comment upon the morality represented through the story; or to assess possible reasons for the popularity of the novel series in contemporary culture. A slight majority of students responded to the questions about morality. His students predominantly produced *significant to exemplary* evidence of critical literacy skills based on the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric.

Finally, Case C examined the classroom of Mr. Parvis from Carter High School. This case was not bounded by the teaching of a particular literary work, but was instead bounded conceptually by the summative project which required students to independently analyze a contemporary work of fantasy from a critical literacy perspective. In this way, students were expected to demonstrate their familiarity with critical literacy theory and its application to a work not studied in class. Mr. Parvis taught the expected outcome throughout the course, helping the students learn to complete their analyses throughout the semester. Through the students' summative projects, Mr. Berger was able to assess the extent to which the students were able to develop a rigorous explication with an arguable thesis, and independently complete their

analysis of a contemporary work of fantasy. His students predominantly produced *significant to exemplary* evidence of critical literacy skills based on the Critical Literacy Assessment rubric.

Therefore, the students of each of these educators were able to demonstrate the development of critical literacy skills through fantasy literature to an *exemplary* level, as measured on the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric, suggesting that fantasy literature is a strong vehicle to help students learn critical literacy skills.

Chapter Nine: Limitations and Further Thoughts

The previous chapter provided a summary of the data analyses from Chapter Seven, and answered each of the research sub-questions as well as the primary research question in terms of the data analyses. This chapter will explore some limitations of the study and provide recommendations for further research. Personal reflections by the researcher will conclude the chapter.

Research limitations

There are potentially three limitations in this study. A first potential limitation involves the student-subjects. Each of the cases included only high school seniors—nearly all of whom elected to enroll in a fantasy literature class and were, presumably, predisposed toward the genre. Employing fantasy literature in a class of younger students or those who are not self-selected fans of fantasy literature may have less desirable results, although LaRaé (2006) noted the tendency of young students to gravitate toward literature of the fantastic, suggesting that such texts generated excitement in its young readers. Students who are not predisposed toward fantasy literature may require different strategies to engage them with the literature to the same extent, or may entail the selection of texts more suitable to their ages and dispositions. This potential limitation awaits further empirical verification.

A second research limitation involves the texts that were analyzed. This dissertation cannot state with certainty that *all* works of fantasy can be used to help students develop critical literacy skills. However, the research suggests that the mere classification of a text as a work of fantasy does not preclude it from being used to help students develop critical literacy skills. Two fantasy novels—*The Once and Future King* (White, 1958) and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997)—were

the subjects of Case A and Case B, respectively; and five fantasy films—*Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (2011), *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2007), *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2004), *The Lion King* (2011), and *Shrek* (2011)—were analyzed by students in Case C. The students in each of these cases have been able to demonstrate the development of critical literacy skills using these fantasy texts that have broad differences in thematic depth, texture, subject matter, and quality. Their analyses of these works, not to mention the sampling of five fantasy texts discussed in Chapter Four as well as the myriad fantasy texts available for consumption, suggest that other texts with similar depth, texture, and quality may help teachers achieve similar results, an idea posited by other teachers who have informally observed a similar phenomenon (Owen, 1984; Prothero, 1990; Cox, 1990; Thomas, 2003). This limitation may be mitigated by further research.

A third and final potential limitation of this research involves the depth to which teachers understand the concept of critical literacy itself. It is important to note that in the initial contact to request their participation in the study, each teacher was asked if they were familiar with the term *critical literacy*, and each acknowledged that they were. Although the three teachers interviewed for each case articulated different definitions of *critical literacy*—and none identified all the elements listed in Chapter Two above—some common themes emerged. Miss Jameson, from Adams High School, defined critical literacy as *looking at literature...and thinking about it in a more in-depth manner, looking at the complexities of a text, thinking about the choices that an author makes in a critical way [and also] applying that [understanding] to the outside world*. Mr. Berger, from Butler High School, defined critical literacy as *reading skills and being able to understand what a book is trying to say, ...as being critical of what the author has to say, ...and creating an awareness in students of that [text's central] message so the students understand how to read a book for that message and what the*

author is doing. Mr. Parvis, from Carter High School, defined critical literacy as *being able to read, respond, and think on their own*. The core of each definition was student autonomy in their interactions with texts, a concept which is central to critical literacy, a theory of reader empowerment. Miss Jameson and Mr. Berger also noted the role of the author in the text, another key component of critical literacy theory, and Miss Jameson noted the application of the lessons of the text to the “outside world,” a concept also stressed by critical literacy theory.

Furthermore, none of the teachers interviewed mentioned that one of the goals of critical literacy was to help democratize our world, to address social inequities and create a more equitable world wherein people are empowered to act as change agents toward reform. Perhaps as a consequence, the students themselves did not address social equity in their analyses of the texts. Coincidentally, Lewison, et al. (2002) noted a similar occurrence in their study of teachers who were newcomers and novices to critical literacy. In their conclusions, they found that the teachers in their study focused more on sociopolitical issues and disrupting the commonplace rather than on issues of social justice, or examining popular culture or engaging in critical language study. The teachers in their study, trained by the researchers in critical pedagogy and provided extensive support by experienced teachers and critical literacy scholars, still offered limited ways in which they directed student analyses of texts.

This is not to say that fantasy cannot be employed to help students learn about social injustice. In fact, Mr. Berger addressed just such an idea, albeit in a relatively superficial way, in his lesson on *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (Rowling, 1997) in Observation #2 (see Chapter Seven). During this lesson, Mr. Berger had asked his students to reflect on whether they believed adults (*i.e.*, teachers) should be held to the same standards of behavior to which students are held. The students overwhelmingly agreed that applying different standards to teachers, despite their status as adults and

employees, would be inherently unfair. The class went on to note that athletes enjoyed certain benefits in their school (though these were not specifically identified), advantages that the general school population did not enjoy. These two examples illustrate one way *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997) can be used to address social inequality since Harry is privileged by Professor McGonagall by 1) not being punished for unauthorized flying on his broomstick during class, 2) being given his own broomstick (a privilege which is not bestowed upon first-year students like Harry), and 3) being allowed to play on the quidditch (sports) team which is also frowned upon for first-year students. Although the teacher did not move the conversation to the next step, which might have been to list specific advantages enjoyed by teachers and/or athletes or issue a call to action, such as a letter to the principal or a memo to teachers regarding the school's cell phone policy (which teachers sometimes violate while holding students accountable for the policy), in order to help create a more democratic approach to the application of rules, he did use the text to alert the students to such inequalities and help them connect the ideas in the book to their own lives. A teacher more knowledgeable of critical literacy as revolutionary might easily have been able to move the students to that next step through a more thorough discussion of the issue.

Despite the disparities in teachers' articulated definitions of critical literacy, students in the classes of each teacher were able to exhibit critical literacy skills to a significant or even exemplary degree, as measured by the Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric. Although a formal and thorough understanding of critical literacy theory will likely help teachers develop those skills in students, such an understanding does not seem to be a prerequisite and mitigates the impact of this limitation.

Recommendations for further research

This thesis is intended to investigate the use of works of fantasy literature in high school classrooms in Connecticut to help students develop critical literacy skills. It is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of the subject, and additional research will help illuminate this topic. While the texts explicated in Chapter Four were selected as representations of high-quality works of fantasy literature, and the three case studies illustrated the analyses of additional works of fantasy, they represent a tiny fraction of the works of fantasy available for analysis by scholars and for use by educators. Researchers are encouraged to complete their own investigations focused on other fantasy works, especially those that illustrate particular sub-genres of fantasy such as magical realism or are set in different time periods (*e.g.*, the Renaissance or Elizabethan Periods).

The three case studies examined classrooms in rural and suburban settings due to the necessity for opportunity sampling. The cases involved students in twelfth grade, self-selected into one-semester classes that were centered on fantasy literature and were constituted largely with academically homogenous students. Further research involving urban districts, classrooms comprised of younger students (even in the middle or elementary grades), students in academically heterogeneous classrooms, or classes in which students are not self-selected based upon their literary interests is recommended. Such research in younger students might yield different, illuminating data due to the fact that there would be fewer educative influences on such students due to their age, as opposed to students who had progressed nearly through the educational system.

The primary interest of this thesis was in the outcome of classroom instruction, a demonstration of student competence and skill-acquisition, rather than an inquiry into pedagogical approaches with fantasy literature, though that investigation was tangential to the primary research question. A formal investigation into the pedagogical

differences of teachers when employing traditional canonical works as opposed to works of fantasy to teach critical literacy skills is therefore recommended. Furthermore, research into the relative success of teachers using different approaches to teaching critical literacy skills, especially with fantasy literature, is also suggested.

One interesting avenue of inquiry that emerged through conversations with all three educators involved gender disparities, with each educator commenting upon the apparent difference between the interests of males and females in reading fantasy literature, and especially different sub-genres of fantasy (*e.g.*, heroic fantasy, gothic fantasy, satiric fantasy, magical realism, etc.). Therefore, an investigation into the prevalence of male and female interest in works of fantasy and the reasons for that interest seems warranted and might help illuminate curricular decisions when considering the adoption of fantasy literature-based courses.

Throughout the interviews with all three teachers, a variety of interpretations of critical literacy emerged. While their understandings of the term shared some common elements, there was no consistent definition among them, even though each teacher professed an understanding of the term prior to participating in the study and knowledge of the term was expressed as a prerequisite for teacher-subjects. Although each teacher did teach some key aspects of critical literacy skills in their classrooms, none addressed the element of social justice—a key component of neo-Marxist/Freirean critical theory—nor did they address the nature of reading as a political act—a key feature of Australian critical theory. Therefore, an appropriate avenue of research is to investigate the depth to which teachers are familiar with the term and to clarify their understanding of it to determine where discrepancies lie, if any.

Finally, another recurring concept regarding the use of fantasy in high school classrooms—namely, the perceptions of the rigorousness of reading fantasy works—and the reasons for the adoption or non-adoption of fantasy literature into high school

curriculum is warranted. The perspectives of district decision-makers, including teachers, department chairs, principals, directors of curriculum, superintendents, and Boards of Education would illuminate this perspective more fully, helping to either validate or repudiate an important perception of fantasy literature.

Personal reflections

This thesis has not saved a life, nor is it likely to do so in the future. Its value lay in its treatment of fantasy as a serious genre of literature worthy of study in secondary schools. Through my investigations into the literary value of fantasy, I encountered numerous examples of scholarly treatments of fantasy works by well-known authors of the past (*e.g.*, George MacDonald, J.R.R. Tolkien, and C.S. Lewis) and the present (*e.g.*, Ursula K. Le Guin, Phillip Pullman, and J.K. Rowling). Numerous scholarly journals are devoted, in whole or in part, to the explication of fantasy works, such as *Mythlore*, *Tolkien Studies*, and *Modern Fiction Studies*. This thesis is not needed to validate fantasy literature as worthy of scholarly study: Many scholars before me have done so already. It is needed to validate the use of fantasy in high school classrooms, however.

The teachers I encountered who use fantasy in their classrooms are devoted readers of the genre and share their passion with students who, quite often, are equally devoted. But their enjoyment is sometimes seen almost as an academic embarrassment, a “throw-away” course for fringe students to take. Virtually every high school in Connecticut has a full-year course devoted to the study of American literature, and most have courses devoted to British literature. Only seven high schools out of one hundred thirty-seven have courses devoted to fantasy, suggesting the lack of attention it is given by districts or by teachers. Students, too, seem almost embarrassed to be caught reading fantasy as Mr. Parvis noted when he spoke about the interest boys have in reading

fantasy: *The boys read [fantasy] too, but they...might be a little reluctant about sharing that.* There seems to be a sheepishness many people feel in reading a fantasy novel, especially in public and most especially in school, and even with supposedly “enlightened” English teachers (Owen, 1984). I hope this thesis, in its own small way, helps to bring down that wall separating fantasy from “serious” literature and bring more fantasy into the high school classroom. My goal is not to see another seven high schools develop fantasy literature-based courses, but for teachers to be unafraid to integrate works of fantasy into traditional classrooms, for this work to help warrant the use of fantasy in mainstream classes.

I enjoyed going into other teachers’ classrooms and watching them work with students. I appreciated the differences in style and watching how each teacher pushed the students to think more deeply, more critically about the literature. If I were able to begin the research again, I would have spent more time observing classes, going into the classrooms of teachers who use traditional literature in order to examine their practice and compare it with teachers of fantasy literature. I would like to have been able to spend every day with a teacher throughout an entire unit to watch the development of the lessons and examine more closely how the teacher directs the students’ exploration of a work of fantasy.

I also enjoyed hearing the perspectives of the students and their experiences in classrooms where they studied traditional and fantasy literature to note differences in their perceptions. I asked some of the students about the approaches their teachers took in class as they taught fantasy as compared to teachers who taught traditional literature, but I sensed an immediate reluctance in the students when I did so, as if they thought I wanted them to critique their teachers, or if I were offering my own implicit criticism in bringing up the subject. In retrospect, I would have asked about their experiences in each type of classroom in separate questions at different times during the interview to

reduce the chance that my line of questioning might be seen as an “attack” on a respected teacher.

Other interesting avenues of research have opened themselves up to me in the process of reflecting on my experiences. The disparate opinions toward fantasy of the genders, as mentioned above, is an area of interest to me, especially as it impacts the reading of fantasy sub-genres. In addition to this is the openness of each gender in professing a love of fantasy—or perhaps of literature in general. Mr. Parvis noted that *girls [will] readily admit that they read [fantasy] and carry it around*, but boys tend not to. Perhaps fantasy is seen as less masculine, perhaps it is seen as being in the purview of females, or perhaps it is associated with a certain type of reader with which boys are reluctant to identify. Perhaps boys might prefer a different sub-genre of fantasy, one that is not currently in vogue right now.

A final observation occurs to me regarding J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (1997), a text that was analyzed in Chapter Four, in Case Study B, and in Case Study C (though the film version was analyzed in this Case). In each of these instances, a different approach was taken to analyze the novel. Different aspects of the text were illuminated by each reader, providing a variety of perspectives on the work. These variations in approach suggest the adaptability of *Harry Potter* to a variety of contexts, and its employment in any number of courses devoted variously to fantasy literature, British literature, feminist studies, mythology, or any number of others. The same could be said of the other works of fantasy explicated in this thesis, suggesting the appropriateness of fantasy to non-genre-based curricula. My hope is that, with the help of this thesis, teachers who have previously disparaged fantasy as an academic literature, or who are embarrassed by their enjoyment of it, may confidently incorporate it into their classrooms, using it as a vehicle to teach a variety of skills, or simply to share with students their own love of fantasy literature.

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Appendix A: Ethics Proforma

A PROFORMA FOR

STAFF AND STUDENTS BEGINNING A RESEARCH PROJECT

Institute for Learning

Research Proposer(s): MARK A. FABRIZI

Programme of Study: Ph.D.

Research (Working Dissertation/Thesis) Title: TO WHAT EXTENT CAN CRITICAL LITERACY SKILLS BE TAUGHT THROUGH THE USE OF FANTASY LITERATURE: AN EXAMINATION OF PRACTICE IN SELECTED CONNECTICUT HIGH SCHOOLS.

Description of research (please include (a) aims of the research; (b) principal research question(s) (c) methodology or methodologies to be used (d) who are the participants in this research, and how are they to be selected.

(A) MY RESEARCH AIMS TO INVESTIGATE THE EXTENT TO WHICH TEACHERS CAN ENGENDER CRITICAL LITERACY SKILLS IN STUDENTS USING FANTASY LITERATURE AS A VEHICLE; (B) THE PRINCIPAL QUESTION IS, TO WHAT EXTENT CAN CRITICAL LITERACY SKILLS BE TAUGHT THROUGH THE USE OF FANTASY LITERATURE?; (C) MY METHODOLOGY WILL EMPLOY CASE STUDIES COMPRISED OF TEACHER AND STUDENT INTERVIEWS, FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS, CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS, AND EXAMINATION OF STUDENT WORK; (D) RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS WILL INCLUDE CONNECTICUT HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHERS AND THEIR STUDENTS BASED UPON WHETHER FANTASY LITERATURE IS USED IN THEIR CLASSROOMS AND CRITICAL LITERACY SKILLS ARE BEING TAUGHT.

Proforma Completion Date: 1 APRIL 2011

This proforma should be read in conjunction with the IFL research principles, and the IFL flow chart of ethical considerations. It should be completed by the researchers. If it raises problems, it should be sent on completion, together with a brief (maximum one page) summary of the problems in the research, or in the module preparation, for approval to the Chair of the IFL Ethics Committee prior to the beginning of any research.

Part A

1. Does your research/teaching involve animal experimentation? N

If the answer is 'YES' then the research/teaching proposal should be sent direct to the University Ethics Committee to be assessed.

2. Does your research involve human participants? N

If the answer is 'NO', there is no need to proceed further with this proforma, and research may proceed now. If the answer is 'YES' please answer all further relevant questions in part B.

Part B

3. Is the research population under 18 years of age? N

If yes, will you taking the following or similar measures to deal with this issue?

(i) Informed the participants of the research?

N

(ii) Ensured their understanding?

N

(iii) Gained the non-coerced consent of their parents/guardians?

N

4. Will you obtain written informed consent from the participants? N

If yes, please include a copy of the information letters and forms requesting consent. If no, what measures will you take to deal with obtaining consent?

5. Has there been any withholding of disclosure of information regarding the research to the participants? N

If yes, please describe the measures you have taken to deal with this.

6. Issues for participants. Please answer the following and state how you will manage perceived risks:

a) Do any aspects of the study pose a possible risk to participants' physical well-being (e.g. use of substances such as alcohol or extreme situations such as sleep deprivation)? YES NO

b) Are there any aspects of the study that participants might find humiliating, embarrassing, ego-threatening, in conflict with their values, or be otherwise emotionally upsetting? YES NO

c) Are there any aspects of the study that might threaten participants' privacy (e.g. questions of a very personal nature; observation of individuals in situations which are not obviously 'public')? YES NO

- d) Does the study require access to confidential sources of information (e.g. medical records)? YES NO
- e) Could the intended participants for the study be expected to be more than usually emotionally vulnerable (e.g. medical patients, bereaved individuals)? YES NO
- f) Will the study take place in a setting other than the University campus or residential buildings? YES NO
- g) Will the intended participants of the study be individuals who are not members of the University community? YES NO

*Note: if the intended participants are of a different social, racial, cultural, age or sex group to the researcher(s) and there is **any** doubt about the possible impact of the planned procedures, then opinion should be sought from members of the relevant group.

7. Might conducting the study expose the researcher to any risks (e.g. collecting data in potentially dangerous environments)? Y N
8. Is the research being conducted on a group culturally different from the researcher/student/supervisors?
If yes, are sensitivities and problems likely to arise?
If yes, please describe how you have addressed/will address them. Y N Y/N?
9. Does the research/teaching conflict with any of the IfL's research principles? (please see attached list).
If yes, describe what action you have taken to address this? Y N
10. Are you conducting research in the organisation within which you work? Y N
11. If yes, are there any issues arising from this .e.g. ones of confidentiality, anonymity or power, because of your role in the organisation
If there are, what actions have you taken to address these? Y N
12. If the research/teaching requires the consent of any organisation, will you obtaining it?
If no, describe what action you have taken to overcome this problem. Y N
13. Have you needed to discuss the likelihood of ethical problems with this research, with an informed colleague?
If yes, please name the colleague, and provide the date and results of the discussion. Y N

If you have now completed the proforma, before sending it in, just check:

- a. Have I included a letter to participants for gaining informed consent?
- b. If I needed any organisational consent for this research, have I included evidence of this with the proforma?
- c. If I needed consent from the participants, have I included evidence for the different kinds that were required?
- d. If I am taking images, have I completed the Image Permission Form

Lack of proof of consent attached to proformas has been the major reason why proformas have been returned to their authors.

This form must be signed by your supervisor and the IfL Ethics Committee representative for your area. Once signed, copies of this form, and your proposal must be sent to Mrs Jackie Lison, Centre for Educational Studies (see flow chart), including examples of letters describing the purposes and implications of the research, and any Consent Forms (see appendices).

Name of Student/Researcher MARK A. FABRIZI

Signature *Mark A. Fabrizi* Date 1 APRIL 2011

Name of Supervisor/Colleague

Signature Date

Name of Ethics Committee member

Signature Date

Appendix B: Blank Consent Forms

Informed Consent – Building Principal

Title of research: Teaching critical literacy skills through fantasy literature

Investigator: Mark A. Fabrizi, English Department Chair, North Branford High School, CT

Explanation of procedures:

I am a doctoral candidate conducting research through the University of Hull in Great Britain. One of the teachers in your building has been invited to participate in a research project to investigate the degree to which fantasy literature can be used to develop critical literacy skills in Connecticut high school students. The research will involve one or more classroom observations, two interviews with the teacher, one or more focus group interviews with several students, and one or more interviews with individual students during which at least one other adult will be present. All interviews and observations will be audio-recorded, but not videotaped. The classroom observations will not disrupt instruction, and the teacher will be teaching the class throughout the observations. If you have any questions, I can be contacted via email (mfabrizi@comcast.net) or phone (860.575.3620).

Confidentiality:

All information gathered from the study will remain confidential. The identities of the participants and the school and its community will not be disclosed to any unauthorized persons; only myself and the Faculty of Education at the University of Hull will have access to the research materials, which will be kept in a locked file. Any references to participants' identities or to the school itself that would compromise their anonymity will be removed or disguised prior to the preparation of the research report. The last names of participants will not be used in the transcripts of the recording.

Withdrawal from participation:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Each participant is free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time.

Agreement:

This agreement states that you have received a copy of this informed consent. Your signature below indicates that you understand what is involved in the study.

Signature of Principal

Date

Name of Principal (printed)

Signature of Researcher

Date

Informed Consent – Teacher

Title of research: Teaching critical literacy skills through fantasy literature

Investigator: Mark A. Fabrizi, English Department Chair, North Branford High School, CT

Explanation of procedures:

I am a doctoral candidate conducting research through the University of Hull in Great Britain. Your class has been selected to participate in a research project to investigate the degree to which fantasy literature can be used to develop critical literacy skills in Connecticut high school students. The research will involve one or more classroom observations as well as two recorded interviews lasting approximately one hour each. Following each interview, you will receive written transcripts to which you may add, delete, or correct any answer you have provided to ensure an accurate and thorough response. The classroom observations will not disrupt instruction, and you will be teaching the class throughout the observations. You may be asked to complete a brief written survey at the end of the class. The observations will be audio-recorded, but not videotaped. If you have any questions, I can be contacted via email (mfabrizi@comcast.net) or phone (860.575.3620).

Confidentiality:

All information gathered from the study will remain confidential. Your identity as a participant will not be disclosed to any unauthorized persons; only myself and the Faculty of Education at the University of Hull will have access to the research materials, which will be kept in a locked file. Any references to your identity that would compromise your anonymity will be removed or disguised prior to the preparation of the research report. Your last name will not be used in the transcripts of the recording.

Withdrawal from participation:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Each participant is free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time.

Agreement:

This agreement states that you have received a copy of this informed consent. Your signature below indicates that you understand what is involved in the study.

Signature of Teacher

Date

Name of Teacher (printed)

Signature of Researcher

Date

Informed Consent – Student

Title of research: Teaching critical literacy skills through fantasy literature

Investigator: Mark A. Fabrizi, English Department Chair, North Branford High School, CT

Explanation of procedures:

I am a doctoral candidate conducting research through the University of Hull in Great Britain. You are being asked to participate in a research project to investigate the degree to which fantasy literature can be used to develop critical literacy skills in Connecticut high school students. The research will involve a brief individual interview, a small group interview, or both, during which you will be asked some questions about your perceptions and experiences concerning critical literacy and fantasy literature as well as some demographic questions. The interview should last 15-30 minutes and may be audio-recorded but will not be videotaped. Following the interview, you will receive written transcripts to which you may add, delete, or correct any answer you have provided to ensure an accurate and thorough response.

Confidentiality:

All information gathered from the study will remain confidential. Your identity as a participant will not be disclosed to any unauthorized persons; only myself and the Faculty of Education at the University of Hull will have access to the research materials, which will be kept in a locked file. Any references to your identity that would compromise your anonymity will be removed or disguised prior to the preparation of the research report. Your last name will not be used in the transcripts of the recording.

Withdrawal from participation:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Each participant is free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time.

Agreement:

This agreement states that you have received a copy of this informed consent. Your signature below indicates that you understand what is involved in the study and that you agree to participate.

Signature of Student

Date

Student Name (printed)

Signature of Researcher

Date

Informed Consent – Parent

Title of research: Teaching critical literacy skills through fantasy literature

Investigator: Mark A. Fabrizi, English Department Chair, North Branford High School, CT

Explanation of procedures:

I am a doctoral candidate conducting research through the University of Hull in Great Britain. Your child is being asked to participate in a research project to investigate the degree to which fantasy literature can be used to develop critical literacy skills in Connecticut high school students. The research will involve a brief individual interview, a small group interview, or both, during which s/he will be asked some questions about their perceptions and experiences concerning critical literacy and fantasy literature. At least one other adult will be present during the interview, and you may attend if you wish. The interview should last 15-30 minutes and may be audio-recorded but will not be videotaped. Following the interview, your child will receive written transcripts to which s/he may add, delete, or correct any answer s/he has provided to ensure an accurate and thorough response. The research project, including the interview questions and all procedures, have been approved by the University of Hull Ethics Committee. Please contact Dr. Michael Bottery (M.P.Bottery@hull.ac.uk) if you have any questions or concerns.

Confidentiality:

All information gathered from the study will remain confidential. Your child's identity as a participant will not be disclosed to any unauthorized persons; only myself and the Faculty of Education at the University of Hull will have access to the research materials, which will be kept in a locked file. Any references to her/his identity that would compromise her/his anonymity will be removed or disguised prior to the preparation of the research report. Her/His last name will not be used in the transcripts of the recording.

Withdrawal from participation:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Each participant is free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time. If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact me via phone (860.575.3620) or email (mfabrizi@comcast.net).

Discontinuance:

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this academic study, YOU DO NOT NEED TO DO ANYTHING. Your signature below indicates that you understand what is involved in the study and that you DO NOT want your child to participate. Sign and return the form ONLY IF YOU ARE WITHHOLDING PERMISSION for your child to be interviewed for this educational research project.

Signature of Parent or Guardian

Date

Parent/Guardian Name (printed)

Name of Student (printed)

Appendix C: Initial survey to CT English Department Chairs

1. Do you use fantasy literature as classroom texts? Why or why not?
2. What fantasy literature do you use (or have you ever used)? Please list all titles used.
3. Do you teach critical literacy skills in your classroom?
4. Why do you teach critical literacy skills? Please check all that apply. List other reasons.
5. From what literary time periods are the books you use to teach critical literacy drawn? Check all that apply.
6. From what literary genres are the books you use to teach critical literacy drawn? Check all that apply.
7. Do you use fantasy literature to teach critical literacy skills?
8. Why don't you use fantasy literature to teach critical literacy skills? Check all that apply?
9. Why do you use fantasy literature to teach critical literacy skills? Check all that apply.
10. What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of using fantasy literature to teach critical literacy skills? Please describe.
11. What grade(s) do you teach? Check all that apply.
12. Are you willing to be interviewed on this subject at a later date? If so, please enter an email address below where I can contact you.

Appendix D: Interview Questions

Interview questions for teachers

Stage One

1. How many years have you been teaching? All at this school? Where did you go to college?
2. Why did you become a teacher?
3. How would you describe yourself and your approach to teaching?
4. With which grade(s) do you use works of fantasy?

Stage Two

1. What are your favorite novels to teach?
2. What aspects of a novel do you look for when considering it as a classroom text?
3. How do you define fantasy literature?
4. Why do you use fantasy literature in your classroom?
5. What fantasy texts do you use, and why did you choose those in particular?
6. How do your students feel about fantasy literature?
7. Have you ever met with resistance from administrators, parents, students, or other teachers for using fantasy literature in your classroom? If so, what objections have they raised?
8. What does the term 'critical literacy' mean to you?
9. Describe your approach to teaching critical literacy skills with fantasy literature.
10. Is there any aspect of critical literacy that you emphasize when you use fantasy literature?
11. What are some of the strengths of using fantasy to teach critical literacy skills? Weaknesses?
12. Tell me about the unit you are teaching/preparing to teach.
 - What book will you be teaching? Have you taught it before?
 - What aspect(s) of critical literacy will you focus on? Why?
 - If you have taught this unit before, have you revised it? How? Why?
13. Do you anticipate any difficulties?
14. Tell me about the students. How do they approach literature? Fantasy?
15. Have you had any other experiences teaching fantasy literature that you think would be germane to my research?

Stage Three

1. How did the unit go?
2. Did you accomplish everything you set out to do?
3. Did anything go better/worse than you expected?
4. Did you make any changes in the middle of the unit?
5. What would you do differently next time?
6. Was there anything unexpected that arose from my research? Anything you realized about yourself or your own teaching that may have surprised you?

Interview questions for students

1. What is your favorite subject in school? Why do you like it?
2. Did you choose to take this course from among a variety of options, or were you assigned to this class? If you chose to take the class, why do you take it?
3. What kinds of books do you like to read? Why do you like them?
4. What is your opinion of fantasy books in general?
5. What is your opinion about the book you're reading in class right now?
6. What do you see as the most important themes of the novel?
7. How can reading this book help you in your life?
8. What have you learned from reading the book?
9. Do you feel any kind of personal connection to the book? In other words, does it speak to your life experiences?
10. Describe a person who would really enjoy this book. You might want to consider their personality, their background, and their interests.
11. Is there anything else you'd like to say about the topic?

