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ABSTRACT

Many English teachers face the widespread misconception that if a work of fiction is enjoyable, it cannot be good, or, conversely, if it is good, it cannot be enjoyable. Critics of horror fiction, for example, would likely argue that better reading materials are available for students to read. Inclusion of materials other than "classics" into the curriculum, however, should not depend only on "literary worth" but also on what benefits the adolescent reader gets from the reading experience. John W. Connor and others state that adolescent readers, both male and female, are fascinated by novels of horror and the supernatural. The popularity of the genre is attributed to the popularity of Stephen King. Joseph Patrouch finds that King has "located and exploited an area where science fiction and occult/psychic/horror novels might be said to overlap." Both the writer and the reader may experience somewhat of a catharsis by dealing with certain elements of fear in fiction, and fantasy helps fill the human need to make sense of the world and life. In addition, fantasy and horror fiction allows readers to confront fears in a safe arena. (Contains 8 references.) (PA)

Conquering Fear: The Role of Fantasy and Horror Fiction in the Classroom

by

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1

Conquering Fear: The Role of Fantasy and Horror Fiction in the Classroom

Critics of horror fiction would likely argue that better reading materials are available for students to read. Horror fiction, with few notable exceptions (such as Edgar Allen Poe) have tended to be ignored by teachers, parents and administrators who feel that certain classics that classic books should be read. *Hamlet, Huckleberry Finn, To Kill a Mockingbird* and *A Farewell to Arms* are just of few of the widely taught literary works labeled as classics. While these works are certainly meritorious, ignoring other genres of literature deprives students opportunities of personal growth. Inclusion of other types of materials into the curriculum should not depend only on "literary worth", but also on what benefits the adolescent reader gains from the reading experience.

While many parents may not react negatively to their children reading such authors as Harper Lee, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway or William Shakespeare, a teacher is almost certain to get some sort of reaction if students are sent home with a copy of Stephen King's *Pet Sematary*. A popular author of horror novels, King is not a "classic" writer; rather, he is looked down upon by many critics who feel that horror fiction is a worthless genre. Michele Slung points out (1981, p. 38) that the reason King is not perceived as being in competition with "real writers" is because he writes about ghoulies, ghosties, and things that go bump in the night. Rats, vampires, necromancers, mind-readers, deadly plagues and telekinetic children may sound silly, but there is a long and honorable tradition of such stories. A parent once said to me, "The world is horrible enough without my son having to read that garbage." Others have confided that they love to read

King for "enjoyment" even though they know that there is nothing good about it. This example illustrates a widespread misconception many English teachers face: if something is enjoyable, it can't be any good. The reverse of that is even worse: Anything good can't be enjoyable. These fallacies have persevered despite the efforts of many fine teachers.

It is ridiculous to assume that King's novels are worthless because they are widely enjoyed, but without any type of rationale arguing that King's works, and others in the fantasy genre, are worthwhile, parents, administrators and teachers will subscribe to these types of logic to keep these works out of the classroom. Since most of King's works are classified as horror, they are dismissed before other elements are even considered.

Assuming that students really do have literary needs, the question arises, "Do students need to read literature other than classics?" Specifically, "Do students need to read horror fiction?" It is one of their "genres of choice". John W. Connor, Kathleen M. Tessmer, Nancy T. Fetz, and Alyce J. Toloui (1984, p. 66) state that adolescent readers, both male and female, are continuously fascinated by novels of horror and the supernatural. The popularity of the genre is attributed to the popularity of Stephen King. Included in this list of books for young adults are King's Christine and Pet Sematary, the latter work considered by the author to be his most terrifying novel.

Student preference does not indicate a need to include these works into a curriculum, but why do students choose to read horror? Is there an unconscious need to be frightened, to see people other than themselves in terrible predicaments, or to enter a world where impossible things happen? In this sense, horror fiction can be considered fantasy literature. According to Lloyd

Alexander (1988, p. 76), "fantasy always includes at least one element of the impossible, one element that goes against the laws of the physical universe, at least as we currently understand them." Science fiction, then, also seems to fit into the category of fantasy. Are there clear divisions between fantasy, horror, and science fiction? Perhaps, but there is a "gray area" in which the three genres overlap. Joseph F. Patrouch Jr. (1983, pp. 9-10) states that King has "located and exploited an area where science fiction and occult/psychic/horror novels might be said to overlap." He adds that whatever else King may be considered, it should not be forgotten that he is also a science fiction writer.

Some critics consider fantasy "escape" literature, because it allows the reader to get away from the problems of his or her world and become involved in those of an imaginary realm. Do readers need an occasional escape from reality? According to Lucia Owen (1984), fantasy does three things better than other fiction. First, it provides exercise for the imagination, a rather unfashionable accessory these days. Secondly, it allows readers to see themselves more clearly precisely because it takes place in the imagination. Roger C. Schlobin (1979) adds that the removal from the commonplace, an essential element of fantasy literature, allows the reader to examine cultural and human issues in a way which is unclouded by social immediacy. Most importantly, fantasy allows escape and generates hope. Owen further states that events in fantasy literature allow readers to recognize the fulfillment of horrible prophecies without having to deal with them in the real world.

Joe Grixti (1982) indicates that horror fiction provides the reader with a safe context for exploration. The reader can imagine what it is like to be on the brink of disaster, but the

exploration is taking place in a carefully controlled atmosphere. The reader has now been exposed to fears which were previously unmanageable. This exposure may help the reader emerge from the experience with a different view of self. Grixti further states that the reader may use the experience as proof, to both peers and self, that he or she is no longer a child but tough-skinned, or that he or she will not be trapped into an unduly disturbing suspension of disbelief. The reader may also use the experience as a way of breaking societal conventions - either by claiming to enjoy what should logically be distressing, or by laughing at what society finds disturbing. A reader may feel a "coming of age" by finishing a horror novel that many people are afraid to read.

Even though students have a noted preference for fantasy and horror fiction, and may emerge from the reading experience with a newly-found sense of courage and maturity, critics have also argued as to the literary worth of such fiction. Writers such as Edgar Allen Poe, Ambrose Bierce, and Shirley Jackson are in a considerable minority as horror writers whose works are included in curriculums. The lack of representation in classrooms does not mean, however, that the horror genre is without merit. Ben Nelms, Elizabeth Nelms, and Regina Cowin (1985) point out that the Gothic novel was a product of the Age of Reason, and it continues to flourish in an age of science and skepticism. King's short story "Trucks" points out his fear of electronic technology by having machines develop minds of their own.

Some may argue that a story such as "Trucks" not only allows the writer to express fears and problems with the real world, but allows the reader to deal with such problems. Alexander (1988) relates that fantasy as a high art isn't an escape from the world; rather, it helps readers come to

terms with it. Both the writer and the reader may experience somewhat of a catharsis by dealing with certain elements of fear in fiction. Alexander also believes that fantasy helps fill the human needs to make sense out of the world and out of our own lives. An irrational fear of machines becomes a very rational fear when placed in the fantasy arena. A story like "Trucks" exaggerates and exploits this type of fear, which brings the fear out in the open. The reader may realize that this fear isn't really all that irrational, since the writer and other readers obviously have them as well. Conversely, the reader may view this fear as ridiculous and emerge from the reading experience having faced the fear and having overcome it. Either way, people are allowed to experience these "irrational" emotions in an environment that allows and justifies such fears.

The cathartic element is very important to the fantasy reader. Authors such as King, who often pervert the world to exploit its problems, rely on the need of the reader to deal with these fears. If there were nothing to fear in the world, fantasy fiction would be a lost art. Hopefully, most parents would rather have their child read about facing a mass murderer than actually encountering one. Yet the reader is allowed to face a fear when reading horror literature without risking life or limb. "We find good guys and bad guys and no mistaking who's who - a situation appreciably different from real life." (Alexander, 1988, p.77). Alexander continues by indicating that, in real life, people carry both the good side and the bad side within themselves. Fantasy externalizes both sides and helps the reader recognize them. In addition, fantasy and horror fiction allows readers to confront fears in a safe arena. Rather than being forced to deal with certain fears in the real world, readers are given the opportunity to confront these fears in fiction. If the fear becomes too intense, the reader can always close the book and face the fear when he or

she is ready. Too bad real life isn't as accommodating.

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