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Adam Kotlarczyk

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, akotlarczyk@imsa.edu

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Tolkien and Gifted Students: Blending Creative and Critical Thinking

By Adam Kotlarczyk

In “The American Scholar,” Emerson warns against letting books become tyrants. As education “reformers,” political forces, and other special interests continue to pull modern teachers in so many different pedagogical directions, Emerson’s warning is increasingly powerful. Books tyrannize, Emerson says, when we use them passively by simply absorbing information from them, rather than actively by catalyzing our own thinking and actions with them. In effect, he claims that books are not something simply to be learned, memorized, or analyzed, but should help us to create. Today’s gifted student, her schedule usually overflowing with work and co-curriculars in an environment often hyperconscious of grades, may be more susceptible to “book tyranny” than others, and may even seek to impose it on herself: “Just tell us what this book ‘means,’ teacher, and whether it will be on the test.” Learning is thereby reduced to information collection, a subordination further simplified by the preponderance of online study guides, summaries, and ready-made essays that are just a Google search away.

In the English classroom, the evaluation, analysis, and synthesis of writing a paper start to move students toward a model of learning in which they engage high-order thinking skills and don’t just collect information, but these assessments stop short of actual creation. Analyzing symbolism in “Young Goodman Brown” is not the same as writing an original short story containing symbols. With apologies to Benjamin Bloom (and his intellectual descendants), creativity deserves its own place atop the taxonomic heap, as anyone who has created a lesson plan probably can attest. It can be difficult, however, to encourage creative and critical thinking simultaneously in the classroom. Even in English departments, where creativity is often valued

more than it is in other disciplines, creative activities can be relegated to wholly separate classes – a creative writing course, for example – while it is nearly abandoned in others.

But it isn't impossible to blend creativity and critical thinking in the curriculum. In fact, following Emerson's thinking, critical thought can (and, I would argue, *should*) facilitate creativity. I recently designed and taught an elective course at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy that attempted this sort of blending of critical and creative thinking; the unique subject matter of the course helped enable merged learning to take place: the works of J.R.R. Tolkien.

Tolkien himself serves as a model of a blended style of critical and creative learning. Of course, most know him primarily for his creativity – *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* – but it wasn't until he was in his forties that he first earned major recognition for his fiction with *The Hobbit*. Before that – and indeed, long afterward – his critical side prevailed: he was a professor of English and Anglo-Saxon at Leeds and Oxford, and his best known publication was a long, analytical piece dissecting the Old English poem *Beowulf*.

“Books,” Emerson wrote, “are for nothing but to inspire,” and Tolkien seemingly took that to heart, with the ancient texts he taught and analyzed in his discipline often inspiring his own work. Many of the character names and personalities from *The Hobbit*, for example, are inspired by the Old Norse poem “Voluspá” Durin, Balin, Nain, Dain, Bifur, Bofur, Thrór, Thrain, and Thorin, to name just a few (Anderson 77). Some of the plot can be attributed to Tolkien's bewilderment over an “elvish” name – “Gandálf” (an Old Norse compound of “Wand” or “Staff” and “Elf”) – appearing in a list of dwarf names (Shippey 17). Likewise, in much of *The Lord of the Rings* we see the influence of Tolkien's critical study of Anglo-Saxon verse, particularly *Beowulf*. From the names in Rohan like Theoden (from Anglo-Saxon *þeoden*,

or “king, leader”) to the arrival of Aragorn at Meduseld (which closely mirrors the arrival of Beowulf at Heorot) to the overall theme and mood of lamentation, the Geat’s influence is evident (Tolley).

Tolkien’s diverse creative and critical writings are highly suitable for a rigorous gifted English curriculum. Don’t be fooled by the few lingering protests that his work is not “serious” literature; while there always may be those who think, as famous critic Edmund Wilson once wrote, that *The Lord of the Rings* is “balderdash” and “juvenile trash,” that prejudice is quickly being outpaced by the high opinions that have put Tolkien in high school and college course catalogs across the country and world, from the University of Chicago to the University of Cambridge. This isn’t to argue, of course, that Tolkien should supplant the traditional classics, but only that his work is a worthy supplement to them – and an excellent way to spark creativity and engage critical analysis in students.

As any teacher can attest, it helps to have subject matter in which students are already interested. And whatever you think of Peter Jackson’s film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, they have grossed billions (yes, with a ‘b’) at the box office and given us a Tolkien film in six of the last fourteen years, making Tolkien a household name to students, if he wasn’t before. But, as Carol Jago writes, “Selecting literature for your class isn’t a matter of finding books that students like. It’s about teaching stories that make them think” (59). In Tolkien’s writing, we’re lucky to have both.

Maps

Creativity as a learning tool has to begin with critical thinking, and my class on Tolkien was no exception. We began with the relatively simple exercise of analyzing his maps. We tried

to understand what these representations of space teach us about cultures and cultural differences. Focusing on Thror's map from *The Hobbit* (usually at the beginning of the book), we contrasted it to the map of the Wilderland (usually at the end). Thror's map is the product of a dwarvish (as Tolkien would say) culture, while the Wilderland map likely is the product of Bilbo's hand, by and for hobbit culture. With Thror's map covered in runes, there are obvious linguistic differences, but it's also worth discussing with students that even the orientation of Thror's map, where up is not north but east, is different in dwarvish culture. The difference in scale may also be telling. Bilbo's map, concerned with a larger world outside the Shire, shows a much broader scale, while Thror's is focused, almost obsessively, on the Lonely Mountain and its immediate surroundings – leaving no doubt as to what is the center of the universe of the expatriate dwarves. The labels of Thror's map likewise tell us that it is the product of a culture hyper-aware of its past: "Here of old *was* Thrain King under the mountain," says one label; "Here *was* Girloin Lord in Dale" says another (emphasis mine). The past tense shows us a culture seemingly past the zenith of its influence.

Once we've discussed how much a map can reveal about the culture that produced it, I challenge the students to create a map of their own fictional place. My only requirements are that it have both physical and political features, at least six of which are labeled. I also require a brief (approx. 250 word) self-analysis in which the student explain choices in scale, size, and style. I allow either hand-drawn or computer-generated maps. The only safeguard I put in place is to forbid maps that resemble real places (or, since I work with high school students, body parts). I wasn't sure what to expect from this assignment with gifted students – would they think it silly? Could they come up with something original, or would it be a bunch of *Hobbit* clones? The results amazed me, and suggest that gifted students really need even more outlets for their

creativity. Instead of the 8.5 by 11 scribbles I was expecting, I received scrolls, parchment, 3-dimensional efforts...even a map that was hand-sewn from scraps of cloth – the people inhabiting that world hadn't invented paper, the self-analysis informed me. The other analyses were no less thoughtful.

Language

Of course, most maps require labels, and labels require language. So the map assignment bridged to their second creative assignment, in which they created the rudiments of a language. We often discussed the influence of languages, especially Old English, on Tolkien's work. Again, creativity begins with critical analysis. We studied Old English briefly, enough for them to be able to translate (with the use of crib sheets) a short passage from *Beowulf* and some of the Old English poem fragment "The Wanderer" – a piece from which Tolkien borrows Aragorn's "Where is the horse and the rider?" chant in *The Two Towers* (497). We didn't focus on memorizing vocabulary (I always provided glossaries and crib sheets of declensions and conjugations) so much as understanding structure and syntax, principally the use of conjugations, inflections, and declensions. But we didn't stop with this understanding, as a traditional foreign language class might. In an end-of-year course survey, one student commented "This class has taught me more about the fundamentals of language than probably all my previous English and French classes together. Creating a language definitely teaches you so much more than just studying for it." I believe that creating their own languages compelled students to consider anew many of the elements and rules of language.

In the first language creation assignment, each student created an alphabet (with pronunciations), basic inflections (plurals and present tense verb conjugation) with the option to write additional inflections for things like gender, honorifics, or to indicate possession. I

English	Part of Speech	Old English	Latin	Your Language
Wise	Adjective	Wise	sapiens	
Small	Adjective	Lytlan	parvus	
Old	Adjective	Ealda	antiquis	
Quick	Adjective	Swiftan	velox	

Table 1.0 Part of a Language Creation Worksheet

encouraged students to look to

Appendix E of *Return of the King*

or to consult Ruth S. Noel's *The*

Languages of Tolkien's Middle-Earth (1974) for inspiration. I warned them only to keep it simple at this point, for example, by using mostly the Roman alphabet – Old English is a good model. Still, some invented entirely new alphabets (this isn't recommended; it creates headaches in later assignments). Students also completed a vocabulary of about 35 words. For some of these terms, I asked for specific words translated from English (see Table 1.0 for an example), but for others, students chose which words they wanted to translate from English to their invented language, with the only requirement being a mix of different parts of speech. In our analysis of languages, we noted that they all had some words that were unique and not easily translated, so I also asked students to create one word that did not have a direct equivalent in English. Like their maps, this unique word would tell us something about the culture they were creating.

In their second language assignment, students expanded on this concept, taking their language and developing a basic syntax. English sentences (like this one) favor subject-verb-object. But Latin was often subject-object-verb, and Welsh even uses verb-subject-object. Students also had to create two idioms – expressions unique to their language that tell us something about the values and mindset of the people who speak it. Finally, in this assignment,

students were asked to translate some basic English sentences, the vocabulary of which I'd already asked them to complete in the required words of the prior assignment, into their own language. This provided an outlet to test the rules of grammar and syntax they were developing.

Creative Writing

The final creative assessment of the course is perhaps the most obvious: creative writing. Because fiction writing is only part of the creative engagement of the course, students learn it in a fairly limited way, producing only one short story. This story comes near the end of the semester, providing a capstone to the earlier creative projects by asking students to intertwine their language and map assignments, as their story takes place in the world they've created.

Because the course is not purely a creative writing course, we provide a lot of peer support and feedback. For crafting their stories, students are divided into small groups of about three or four. These groups – named their “Inkling” groups after Tolkien’s peer-sharing group of the same name, which included C.S. Lewis – convene in the last ten or fifteen minutes of class to discuss and workshop characters, plots, and progress on stories.

The writing is scaffolded by brief lessons and practice in character creation and peer review of plot points. And, like the creative activities of making a map or a language, it is first grounded in a critical analysis of the quest story. We start with W.H. Auden’s six elements of a quest adventure, from his essay “The Quest Hero”:

1. A precious Object and/or Person to be found and possessed or married.
2. A long journey to find it, for its whereabouts are not originally known to the seekers.

3. A hero. The precious Object cannot be found by anybody, but only by the one person who possesses the right qualities of breeding or character.
4. A Test or series of Tests by which the unworthy are screened out, and the hero revealed.
5. The Guardians of the Object who must be overcome before it can be won. There may be simply a further test of the hero's *arête*, or they may be malignant in themselves.
6. The Helpers who with their knowledge and magical powers assist the hero and but for whom he would never succeed. They may appear in human or in animal form. (44)

We discuss the degree to which *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* fit Auden's formula. Students also enjoy a discussion on high vs. low fantasy, noting particularly how in high fantasy, the hero almost never wins his goal through direct combat or force. Although the story assignment itself is very short – my recommendation is in the neighborhood of five pages – I encourage the students to provide an outline, treatment, or summary of a more epic plot into which this short story fits. This enables them to create stories with more befitting themes, like power politics, the birth and death of nations, the end of the world, good vs. evil, etc. At the same time (and almost paradoxically), I encourage them to keep the story itself simple, as it is in many myths (or, as Joseph Campbell argues, in all of them): a simple journey and return home.

Critical Analysis and Creativity

Peter Jackson's films have rekindled public interest and provided a great opportunity for English teachers to capitalize on Tolkien's name recognition and popularity with students. Units

and courses centered on his work provide an ideal ground for analysis and creativity. Because of his career and publications, Tolkien is an ideal subject around which to build a pedagogy that blends critical and creative thinking. His critical writings like “The Monsters and the Critics” (on *Beowulf*) and “On Fairy-Tales” provide models and are worthy of study as essays (or informational texts, as they’re called by some), while his creative works provide subjects for analysis in themselves. And, if Emerson is to be believed, they provide the inspiration to springboard students into their own creative pursuits.

But this technique need not be limited to studies of Tolkien. Indeed, it is limited only by the creativity of teachers themselves and the constraints placed on them by others. Creative assignments can blossom from any area of literature from which key identifying elements can be analyzed and synthesized. One might, for example, in studying the verse of Whitman, analyze and discuss his use of free verse, his use of cataloging lists, his themes of democracy, beauty, and the cycles of life and death. And one might also ask students to create their own free verse pieces modeling his themes and techniques. Creativity as a product of critical thought demands that students understand, analyze, and apply the ideas of the texts they read. Properly implemented, creativity is a high-order – and maybe the highest – manifestation of critical thinking.

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