**The Dead Walk, the Writers Rise From their Graves; A case study on using popular genre media to teach the writing themes of metaphor and symbolism.**

The scene is terrifying, blank, bloodless faces gazing on sightlessly, moaning, their wails building as one. That’s right, you’ve just assigned homework to your high school creative writing class. The good news is that they already know the subject matter: the use of metaphor and symbolism. The bad news is that you have to convince them of this. Traditional literature studies have turned your students into zombies, perpetually moaning because “metaphor” is just a ten dollar word for “what the teacher says the book is about.” Indeed, kicking shambling students into high gear is going to take some doing: educators are going to have to connect with what their charges already know. It’s frightening, yes, but this is the cutting edge sort of tool that the teachers of today need to lop off the problem at the head.

The paragraph above uses many allusions and references to the popular horror subgenre of the zombie. Novels, movies, video games and television media have used these horrifying somnambulists to great effect for decades now, and even non- horror fans are familiar with the concept. This common knowledge is all that the educator needs to build a lesson. As Allen Nail points out in his inspiring “Pedagogy of the Living Dead,” even students who have never watched or read a proper zombie story are familiar with the concept, (Nail 50).

This common, fun pop culture knowledge is an ideal springboard to discuss far reaching literary concepts like symbolism. Indeed, the varied, creative ways in which the zombie concept can be interpreted acts as a very effective demonstration of just what is possible in student writing and literary study. Several cross-genre literary interpretations have been recently undertaken, starting with the delightfully gory, *Pride* *and Prejudice and Zombies,* an entertaining read that uses the original Austen text but intersperses it with exciting action sequences. This mingling of fantasy and the classics makes for an excited audience for both styles of writing where before there might have been apathy. As Melissa Raby says in her article, “Historical Fiction Mash Ups,” “Fusing elements of fantasy, science fiction, or other genres with historical fiction helps meet the demands of today’s teen reader, as well as create a new interest within them for unusual works of fiction,” (Raby 38). It becomes possible to make dry texts engaging through this mingling of genres, and this stategy can lead to success even where there is no, “And Zombies” edition of the book.

This same concept can be used to get students mingling popular genre fiction and longstanding classical literary themes. At the core of the zombie is the desire to consume the living. This is likely what everyone will say about the creature when it is brought up. Further conversation can stem from there, particularly, “are they human,” and the especially juicy, “what is human anyway?” This is the kind of literary theme that can be critical to a semester’s reading, but it’s a very big question. Luckily, popular fiction can get students thinking of the answer.

This English classroom can benefit from tales of shambling hoards, and other disciplines have been making use of the walking dead as well. In his essay, “Varieties of Zombieism,” Derek Hall explores how the societal allegory can specifically be related to the study of economics. Hall models ways in which zombie movies from different capitalistic countries can be used in the classroom to help students understand specific aspects of capitalistic theory, (Hall 2). In a similar fashion, Zombie fiction from different nations can be used in the classroom to understand specific cultural significance. As Hall suggests, the British outbreak movie *28 Days Later* contains certain insight into the British capitalistic world view that differs from an American zombie film. A world literature or mythology unit, for example could make use of two cultures’ tales of the living dead and make a comparison of the themes in each. Since zombie fiction is both composed of cinema and literature, film clips, those favorites of students everywhere, might be used to frame a discussion.

Due to the potentially R-rated nature, though, such a unit would require special parental permission. Fortunately, books on the subject are becoming more and more plentiful. What follows is a way to utilize just a few undead texts in the English classroom.

**The Undead Cirriculum:**

On day one of classroom instruction, present students with an excerpt of Max Brook’s popular texts *World War Z* and *The Zombie Survival Guide*, two “in universe” style fiction pieces that use diverse genres to tell their story. As a warm up and perhaps a review of genre, students are asked to identify the forms that the texts are using, (a historical account and an survival manual, respectively). Both of these Brooks texts are nontraditional fiction in that they resemble nonfiction. This departure from form ought to, at the very least offer a nice change of pace from the standard novel. Next, ask students to consider what was happening in *World War Z*, (what was the conflict, and how was it resolved, who were the characters, etc) The conversation might go to the central point that humans were the ones causing the most trouble even in the midst of a zombie outbreak, though this is only one of the many themes that can be touched on. As a classroom activity, assign students to groups and task them with a role playing scenario: Within their groups, they must assign roles for their post apocalyptic existence together: (who will be responsible for what, will there be a leader, etc) and to establish policies for survival (do they share supplies, do they help other survivors, what do they do with an injured teammate?) and to justify their rationale.

This activity will get the classroom thinking about the human condition and the way that society reacts to adversity, core themes in not only zombie stories, but more “serious” literature as well. Segue into a reading (in class if there is time) of Lu Xun’s “Madman’s Diary,” which is about a man who is convinced he is living amongst cannibals. Lead classroom discussion to consideration of the metaphor and what this consumption of the individual by the many could mean. Bring students back to Max Brooks and ask them to consider the symbolism of the zombie story. It is important to note that students do not have to agree with this interpretation. They should be encouraged to voice different interpretations.

The elegance of this examination of metaphor and cultural symbolism is that it is fairly flexible. It works for world literature, can be tooled for historical literature study, and most definitely for creative writing. Using this popular fiction effectively aligns with best practice since it engages learners with something not only modern, but in the mainstream of fiction. It is a book that has a popular audience in today’s world, and as such literary critique can have a popular audience in student’s peer group. The finished products of this unit would demonstrate writing skills in a way that is still fun to those outside of the class. Ideally, this unit will be written for the enjoyment of not only the writer, but for readers beyond the classroom as well. To the modern reader, looking at English social stigma through the writings of Jane Austen might sound like a good alternative to a sleeping pill, but reading “*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*” and discussing the potency of the apparently silly metaphor in relation to Austen’s England is another thing entirely.

To end with one last Zed Allegory: Student Apathy in the classroom, English or otherwise, used to be a Romero zombie, slow moving, shambling forward, becoming more dangerous as its mass grew. Now, it’s a Rage Virus creature, faster, stronger, more dangerous. What we must do, as defenders of humanity, is choose the best weapon to take this monster’s head off. The sharpest blade to counter disinterest, and the one that ought to be ready in our hands, is popular culture.

Works Cited:

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