Collegiate Writing: The Meaning of Fantasy
Remote Instruction

Course Instructor: Michael Subialka

Course Description:

Fantasy has often been regarded as a somehow inferior genre because it supposedly leads us to “escape” from reality. But what if fantasy is in fact a pursuit to uncover things that otherwise confound us about the human condition, especially in unsettling moments that lack precedent? Could fantasy provide a necessary way to reimagine our world and our lives? This intensive course in analytical writing at the collegiate level will offer a chance to think through these questions and to craft rhetorically-effective essays that explore the meaning of fantasy. The course considers fantasy across various media. We will read literary works including stories by Jorge Luis Borges, Ursula K. Le Guin, HP Lovecraft, and Nnedi Okorafor alongside an overlooked novel by Harlem Renaissance writer Pauline Hopkins; we will watch and discuss films spanning from The Lord of the Rings and Indiana Jones to Inception; we will analyze visual art, including the imaginary realms of Surrealism; and we will investigate the construction of immersive fantasy spaces, from the highly commercial (like Disneyland) to “alternative” spaces (like Burning Man or Meow Wolf). In our writing sessions, we will work closely to develop and refine the techniques of writing and revision that will allow you to transform your ideas and insights into powerful essays, using rhetorical instruction materials and small group workshops that replicate the intensive writing seminars taken by University of Chicago undergraduates.

Objectives:

My main goal is to help you craft more insightful, powerful academic essays. In order to do this, we will need to focus on at least three fundamental skills that go into academic writing:

1. Close, analytical reading
2. Engagement with alternative views (discussion/debate)
3. Thorough revision

All of these skills will be taught and practiced in our daily class meetings with the goal that by the end of the course you will be comfortable: (1) analyzing a variety of texts (written, visual, and filmic) with a careful eye for nuance, (2) considering alternative viewpoints about those texts, and (3) revising your initial analysis to construct more persuasive essays that will communicate your nuanced argument to a reader.

We will engage with writing in a two-step process. For each essay, you will write a draft that develops a close reading of the text in question and makes an argument about that text (or
makes an argument through that text). We will then go through an intensive process of revision, using techniques developed during our morning sessions and in the writing seminars; these techniques will help you re-frame your arguments to make them more persuasive and compelling for a reader who may be reluctant to agree with the points you want to make.

We will thus treat reading and writing as closely-integrated skills to be developed together. By the end of the course, you should come away with new habits of reading and revising that will help you to make more profound and compelling academic arguments in the future.

Required Course Texts (available to purchase from campus bookstore or as e-book online):


Short Text Selections (available to download on Canvas or online):


---. The Silmarillion. [Selection]

(These texts are marked with * in the schedule when they are required reading)

Class Films (to be watched before class for in-class discussion):


Conceptual Structure of Course:
The course readings are broken into three units that address different models or ways of thinking about the meaning of fantasy; these three units are split across the five weeks as indicated in the schedule of readings and discussions below.

We begin with (1), “Fantasy Escapes: Rediscovering the Magical World.” Fantasy is sometimes dismissed as a form of escapism, with the assumption that it is thus not “serious” or “important.” This unit challenges those assumptions by investigating the type of “escape” that fantasy provides, drawing on theories of fantasy that come from some of the most important fantasy writers, including JRR Tolkien, Ursula K Le Guin, and HP Lovecraft. These theoretical readings suggest ways in which fantasy allows us to escape from the confines of the actual world in a way that actually allows us to come to a deeper understanding of it. Paired with these theoretical readings, we will also examine short stories (by Le Guin, written selections (from the Silmarillion), and film (The Lord of the Rings) that highlight the power of fantasy’s magic to help us rediscover our world.

We will then bridge this notion with a second unit (2), “Fantasy Politics: Rewriting the (Future) World,” in which we look at how fantasy not only allows us to see the world in new and powerful ways but also becomes a way of rewriting our own future and reimagining the limits of political life. We begin by looking at an often-forgotten but important work of fantasy, Of One Blood, by Harlem Renaissance writer Pauline Hopkins, which envisions the possibilities of a fantastic African realm hidden from Western civilization. We thus compare Hopkins’ historical fantasy with the image of Wakanda made famous in the Marvel film, Black Panther, as well as the Western, white fantasy of adventure/expropriation/conquest that texts rewrite, such as the Indiana Jones films (Raiders of the Lost Ark). Likewise, stories like Nnedi Okorafor’s “Biafra” show how fantasy enables us to reassess problematic aspects of our past, including the violence and destruction of war, and to cast it in a new and different light. All of these texts suggest that fantasy can be seen as a way of reimagining the limits of the possible and reconfiguring hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, or anything else.

Finally, in the third unit (3), “Fantasy Immersion,” we examine the ubiquitous push in our contemporary world to discover new ways of immersing ourselves in fantasy experiences, from the highly commercial, like Disneyland, to alternative forms of immersive (fantastical) art, from the art festival Burning Man to the immersive installations of Meow Wolf. Immersive theater, like that created by Punchdrunk, likewise engages this drive to envision fantasy as a fully immersive alternate reality. What is the function of this immersion? How does it reconfigure our experience of the world? Pairing these immersive examples with texts by Jorge Luis Borges allows us to consider the ways in which fantasy seeks to turn our world upside down – and what results.

Through all of these units, we will ask how these different texts all push us to rethink fantasy and its power. Perhaps fantasy is ultimately a tool to question and rethink our world – past, present, and future.

Schedule: (Summer Session II, 5-week Remote Course)
NOTE – the topics covered in the principles of writing will be taught through a mix of asynchronous lectures and activities along with synchronous course meetings in which we will discuss and practice these concepts and skills. The reading discussions will all take place synchronously in seminar-style discussions.

**Week I:**
- Principles of Writing Topic: Argument
  - Argument I – Arguing for your Reader
  - Argument II – Nuanced Claims
  - Argument III – Claims, Evidence, and Reasons
  - Argument IV – Close Reading and Interpretative Claims
- Readings/Discussion Topic: Fantasy Escapes: Rediscovering the Magical World
  - Ursula K LeGuin
  - Tolkien, *Silmarillion*
  - Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories”
  - *Lord of the Rings*

**Week II:**
- Principles of Writing Topic: Argument and Discourse Structure
  - Argument V – Counterarguments
  - Discourse Structure I – Coherence
  - Discourse Structure II – Index Positions
- Readings/Discussion Topic: Fantasy Escapes: Rediscovering the Magical World
  - Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space”
  - Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror in Literature”
  - Okorafor, “Spider the Artist”

**Week III:**
- Principles of Writing Topic: Discourse Structure
  - Discourse Structure III – Information Flow
  - Discourse Structure IV.1 – Complex Index Positions
  - Discourse Structure IV.2 – Transitions and Macrostructure
  - Discourse Structure V – Argumentative Depth
- Readings/Discussion Topic: Fantasy Politics: Rewriting the (Future) World
  - Hopkins
  - *Black Panther*

**Week IV:**
- Principles of Writing Topic: Problems and Significance
  - Problem I – Textual Conflicts (Resolving a Problem)
  - Problem II – Significance in Introductions, 1
  - Problem III – Significance in Introductions, 2
  - Problem IV – Resolving a Problem and Concluding
- Readings/Discussion Topic: Fantasy Politics: Rewriting the (Future) World
  - Okorafor, “Biafra”
  - Oriental Institute Visit
  - *Raiders of the Lost Ark*

**Week V:**
- Principles of Writing Topic: Problems and Significance
- Problem V – Significant Conclusions
- Problem Review and Mini-Exercises
- Readings/Discussion Topic: Fantasy Immersion
  - Borges
  - Disneyland
  - Burning Man, Meow Wolf, and Immersive Theater
  - Inception

[Note: Writing Seminars will be scheduled at the beginning of class (students will be assigned groups based on time zone/availability but will have the opportunity in Week 1 to change groups if needed for schedule purposes. Plan on being in the same seminar group all three weeks, so you will need to schedule all three meetings.)]

Grading:

**Papers:** 60% (Paper 1, 10%; Paper 2, 20%; Paper 3, 30%)

**Participation:** 20% (attendance of all meetings, preparation, discussion, and writing exercises)

**Presentation:** 10% (student presentation and discussion leader)

**Writing Seminars:** 10% (attendance of all meetings, timely posting of drafts, active seminar participation, comments on peer drafts)

Expectations for Online Learning:

As you will see in the schedule and in the grading information above, the course will be held with a combination of synchronous meetings on Zoom and asynchronous exercises on Canvas.

**Attendance of synchronous meetings is required,** just like if you were on campus coming to class. Absences will be excused for good reasons (for example, medical issues, etc.) and at the discretion of the Course Instructor and/or Writing Seminar Instructor. If you know you will have to miss a class session, contact the Course Instructor in advance to discuss the absence and to determine how it might be possible to make up the missing materials.

We recognize that the times for these meetings are unusual as a result of our need to balance the schedule to accommodate different time zones. Please plan for these times in advance and make sure to mark down all course meetings, writing seminars, etc., in your schedule in your own local time so that you don’t miss them. Regular synchronous meetings will all be recorded and will only be available to registered students via our course Canvas site. If you must miss a session, you should contact the instructor in advance to discuss whether it is possible to make up the missed session. Do not miss sessions if you can avoid it.

More details about the different types of asynchronous activities will be available on Canvas. Most days, mini-lectures on principles of writing will be posted. Two days a week we will have synchronous meetings devoted to these principles of writing, so you need to keep up with the mini-lectures so that you are on track for those synchronous meetings. The asynchronous materials are available in the “Modules” section of the Canvas site. It is your responsibility to watch these mini-lectures – they constitute part of the homework you do for the course. The videos are accompanied by short writing exercises to practice the skills that are being discussed.
in the lectures, and you must complete these exercises on the day that they are assigned in the Canvas modules.

Writing Seminars:

As a key component of our focus on developing strong, college-level academic writing techniques, you will have the opportunity to work in a small, intensive writing seminar. These seminars are led by University of Chicago writing instructors and are designed to put the skills we work on into immediate practice. **These seminars will be scheduled during the first week of class, and you will need to sign up for a group.** You will have the same group for all three seminars, allowing you to build rapport with each other as you help each other to improve through peer review and feedback. If you have time constraints and need to sign up for a particular seminar meeting time, please let us know right away so we can accommodate you.

For each seminar, you will be expected to submit a complete draft of the essay assignment for that week; these drafts should be submitted online following the instructions that will be given by the Writing Seminar Instructor. They will be due before our synchronous class meeting on the day before writing seminars, so by **6pm Chicago Time (CST) the day before your scheduled writing seminar, unless otherwise instructed by the Writing Seminar Instructor (some deadlines may be changed to accommodate the different times that the different groups meet).** This is a strict deadline, as your peers will need to have time to read and comment on each essay submitted. That means you will also be responsible for reading each of your colleague’s draft submissions and preparing constructive criticism of those drafts. The Writing Seminar Instructor will provide detailed guidance for this process of peer review and constructive feedback each week.

Writing seminars will focus on using the skills we learn in class to help diagnose areas in need of revision and to come up with revision possibilities to make each essay’s argument more compelling for its readers. You should focus on using the concepts/vocabulary from our writing lectures as you comment on your peers’ drafts. This will also help you practice recognizing these same features in your own writing.

**Attendance and active participation for all three writing seminars are required.**

Student Presentations:

Each student will be responsible for leading the class discussion for a period of approximately 15-20 minutes. Presentations will be modeled off of the instructor’s multimedia sessions from the beginning of the course; they will aim to (a) introduce new material to enrich the class’ perspective on the specific topic of the week and (b) encourage active discussion and debate among the whole class. These presentations should make use of techniques of argumentation discussed in class – make a claim, support it with reasoning and evidence, etc. They will be an opportunity for students to develop skills in oral communication, argumentation, and peer discussion.
leadership. Students will sign up for presentations in the first week of class, and dates/times will be assigned for each.

Office Hours:

**Course Instructor:** Available by appointment  
**Writing Seminar Instructor:** Available by appointment

Class Write-Ins:

Writing is a skill that is developed through practice, and professional writers work on their writing every day. Research shows that the best way to write large amounts effectively is by writing regularly, bit-by-bit, rather than waiting until the last minute and doing it all at once. This is especially true in a class like ours, where we are writing and revising continuously to practice new skills and concepts.

For this reason, **we will have group write-ins every week, schedule TBD. Attendance is highly recommended** for these synchronous writing sessions (and you can earn extra credit toward your final paper). Writing together will help us keep each other on track and productive.

Writing Tutor:

The summer session also organizes a writing tutor who will be available for drop-in tutoring. She will also lead seminars on making the transition to doing college-level reading and writing. You should have received information from the summer session office about how to contact the writing tutor for an appointment if you want one. Please feel free to make use of these resources.

Tech Support:

UChicago’s ITS has a virtual tech bar at [bit.ly/virtualtechbar](http://bit.ly/virtualtechbar), which could be useful for you if you have technological issues. The link above opens up an on-demand Zoom meeting. Like the phone help at 773-702-5800, it is available Monday - Friday 7:30am to 6:00pm Central US time. Phone or the tech bar are both better for urgent needs than emailing [itservices@uchicago.edu](mailto:itservices@uchicago.edu)

Disability Statement:
If you have any kind of disability, please talk to the Instructor or TA immediately. We are more than happy to provide any kind of accommodation that will help you succeed in this class.

If you require any accommodations for this course, as soon as possible please provide us with a copy of your Accommodation Determination Letter (provided to you by the Student Disability Services office) so that you may discuss with us how your accommodations may be implemented in this course.

The University of Chicago is committed to ensuring the full participation of all students in its programs. If you have a documented disability and, as a result, need a reasonable accommodation to participate in class, complete course requirements, or benefit from the University's programs or services, you are encouraged to contact Student Disability Services as soon as possible. To receive reasonable accommodation, you must be appropriately registered with Student Disability Services.

Please contact the office at 773-702-6000 or email: disabilities@uchicago.edu or visit the website at disabilities.uchicago.edu.

“Potentiality” Alun Be, 2017
https://www.colum.edu/news-and-events/articles/2018/afrofuturism-then-now-and-in-their-own-form#.Y6DgBHbMI2w