

Spinning Silver Lesson Plan 2
 Fantasy & Gender in *Spinning Silver*
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Overview: The lesson provides an introduction to fantasy and the concept of defamiliarization. This lesson focuses on passages from pages 185-281 in order to explore the ways that the fantasy genre allows Novik to defamiliarize expectations surrounding gender and class.

This lesson includes an activity that has been adapted from the “Object Lesson” exercise included in Diana Fuss and William A. Gleason’s *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 exercises for the college classroom*.

Objectives:

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Define fantasy and its genre conventions
- Practice close reading to develop an understanding of the genre
- Build an understanding of how fantasy enables particular representations of gender

Class Structure:

10 minutes: Lecture on *Spinning Silver* as fantasy

- The abundance of magic in *Spinning Silver* makes it a fantasy novel
- It’s also YA lit, which is why its magic isn’t gruesome or “too weird”
- But the magic in the novel does serve a function that it often serves for fantasy: defamiliarization
 - **Defamiliarization** occurs in art (not just fantasy) when things that familiar are rendered unfamiliar
 - What is the effect? Moments of defamiliarization puts readers in situations that they have not experienced before, which makes them ask more questions than they would when reading familiar, “realistic” depictions. Asking questions may also lead readers to rethink things they take for granted or unthinkingly accept to be true, therefore encouraging new thoughts
 - Defamiliarizing things is a means that can achieve many ends, and what I want us to think about today is how the magic in *Spinning Silver* defamiliarizes familiar objects specifically to make readers think about how one’s gender both restricts and enables certain actions.
 - We’ll do this by closely examining scenes in which familiar objects are defamiliarized through magic

25 minutes: Close reading exercise

- Divide students into two groups. Assign each group one object and a list of pages in which their object performs magic. Give students 10 minutes to work together before coming back together to share their answers.
- Display the following prompts/assignments for students to reference:
 - Group 1: Mirrors/Reflective Surfaces
 - Passages: pgs. 138-3, 142-43, 201-02
 - Group 2: The Witch’s House
 - Passages: pgs. 182-84, 213, 251-54, 281

- Each group should answer the following questions:
 - What magic happens in relation to the object? What does this object enable our characters to do? How does its function compare/contrast to its function in our 'real' world?
 - Pay close attention to what characters can do with (or inside) the magical object and what they actually do. What does this reveal about the characters and their world, particularly in regard to gender norms and roles?
- **Note for instructors:** Here are some of the things students in each group may discuss:
 - Group 1: Mirrors/Reflective surfaces
 - Offers Irina a way to escape
 - Also highlights her limited agency
 - Mirrors provides an escape from the terror associated with the domestic space of the marital bedroom, intimacy with a sorcerer
 - "But I didn't mind it, a pale echo of the cold of that winter kingdom on the other side of the mirror, my refuge. It helped me to be cold, to think" (160)
 - She tries to use the mirror without knowing whether it will work because she is desperate
 - She can't really escape before her human body can't withstand the cold
 - She can't do anything there because she has no other magical power
 - She also can't escape because she is worried about Magreta: "feminine" behavior?
 - End mini-discussion with a comment on how the magic actually emphasizes what Irina can't do (both because she is human/mortal and because she is a woman)
 - Group 2: The Witch's House
 - Warps time and space by existing on the fringes of two kingdoms
 - There is already an element of mystery because Wanda and Sergey assume a witch lives there
 - Concept of witch already has our thinking about social outsiders
 - There is a certain class element to the house—it is the house of a "peasant"
 - It brings the women (Wanda, Miryem, Irina) together and unites their stories, even if they aren't aware of it—they are all escaping a violent patriarchy
 - It literally becomes a refuge for the characters
 - "I still prefer it to the tsar's palace" (281)
 - Reimagines domestic space as a refuge in comparison to the poor experiences all the women have had
 - For each of them, the domestic home isn't safe. Wanda has an abusive father (131). Miryem literally can't escape the room she has in the Staryk kingdom (168). Irina doesn't want to be left alone with her husband out of fear of what might happen to her (161).

- The characters are literally providing what each other needs through different dimension—they are taking care of each other
 - Magra helps Wanda stitch and Irina provides them food; Wanda provides the porridge and the fire
 - The “witch’s house” allows Wanda, Miryem, and Irina all to coexist in the same space, to bend concepts of space and time
 - Allowing the world to become smaller
 - End mini-discussion with comment about how the witch’s house defamiliarizes the connection between domesticity and femininity: the women provide for each other but don’t know how they’re doing it
- Summarize finding from the group discussion:
 - These objects and their magic capabilities cause us to assess/recalculate what we know about the physical spaces associated with marriage and domesticity
 - The mirror and the witch’s house underscore the intense oppression these women are facing individually at the same time that they provide refuge and escape
 - They envision a way for the different women of the narrative to unite in their escape from such patriarchal circumstances, even if they don’t realize that’s the case
 - The moments of magic in the novel all have at their core questions of class and gender—who has power in this world, and how do they use that power? How does magic allow characters to control their own fates?
 - Other instances of magic in our reading:
 - The white tree/nut that represents Wanda’s mother

10 minutes: Final Discussion Questions

- Why fantasy and not realism? What would be different about our understanding of the story if this were a realist novel? What does the genre allow Novik to do in the story?
- Potential Answers:
 - Fantasy allows Novik to envision escapes for the oppressed women, as well as to unite women of very different subject position in a common struggle
 - Fantasy allows Novik to emphasize even more the different class statuses of the various characters
 - Fantasy allows Novik to dramatize the process of women being torn from their homes
 - Also creates a hierarchy—who can cross the borders and who cannot
 - Also lays the groundwork for a large gesture for the women to fight their oppressors

5 minutes: Conclusion

- Our lesson today has focused on showing how the novel’s use of fantasy creates and subverts power structure in the novel, more specifically how magic both exposes women’s confined circumstances and imagine possibilities for their escape and their collaboration
- As you continue reading for next time, continue to investigate how magic elements continue to relate to the women characters’ limitation and opportunities

Further close reading exercises (depending on time)

- Option A: Limitations of Magic — Passage on Saryk silver on p. 215
 - **Discussion Question:** What do we learn about magic here, and how does it influence our reading of Miryem and her circumstances? Of Irina and her circumstances?
 - Magic capabilities of mirrors/reflective surfaces depend on connection to Saryk, so Miryem can't make it back to the sunlit world
 - Establishes some sort of hierarchy among the characters based on class—Irina has the jewelry made of Saryk silver that allows her to travel back and forth
 - Complicates the issue of escaping: Miryem realizes that she is trapped in the Saryk kingdom and that the Saryk king determines when she gets to return to her home
- Option B: Magic and Class Status—Miryem turns silver to gold on p. 237
 - **Discussion Question:** How does the passage's representation of magic illuminate our understanding of Miryem? Of her circumstances? How does Miryem's commentary here shed lights on the magic of turning silver to gold?
 - One more instance of magic that is also related to gender
 - Brings in class as well. Provide quick definition of intersectionality
 - The language invites us to see how magic has "stopped being magical"
 - We know that Miryem has the ability to change silver to gold, but she has lost interest in this process because she is being exploited
 - Her magic ability is more a burden than a talent—magic is power, but not when she is forced to use it
 - The passage calls our attention to the issues of labor—Miryem labors so that the Saryk king can have more wealth
 - The passage thus distances us from the awe associated with gold/wealth and reminds us of the labor side of it: gold literally comes at a price
 - Draws attention as well to Miryem's role: she has been forced into a marriage that she doesn't want to be in and then forced to work for her husband
 - She does sign on to this particular deal, but even then, she does so as a means of bettering her circumstances and possibly achieving an escape

Sources:

Fuss, Diana, and William A. Gleason, editors. *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom*. Princeton UP, 2016.

Novik, Naomi. *Spinning Silver*. Del Ray. 2018.