

***Spinning Silver* Lesson Plan 1**

Introducing Medievalism

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Overview: This lesson provides an introduction to medievalism and context about antisemitism in the Middle Ages. The context provided in this lesson is foundational to understanding the themes and tropes presented in *Spinning Silver*, and therefore this lesson is best suited for day one of teaching the novel.

This lesson includes an activity that has been adapted from the “Blow Up” 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 medievalism and its tropes
- Identify medievalism in *Spinning Silver*
- Close read a passage from *Spinning Silver* in order to identify themes and aspects of medievalism
- Discuss medieval contexts for antisemitism and how they are expressed in the first 95 pages of *Spinning Silver*

Class Structure:

10 minutes: Introduction to medievalism

- Introduce medievalism, text, and framework
 - Segue into a discussion of medievalism (without using the word “medievalism”): start by asking the “philosophical” question: “Did the Middle Ages as we know it end in the Middle Ages?”
 - Provide students with a short overview of what “medieval period” refers to
 - Discuss how the past has been continually reinterpreted
 - Ask for examples of reinterpretations of the medieval period in popular culture: *Game of Thrones*, *The Witcher*, BBC’s *Merlin*
 - Like *Game of Thrones* and *The Witcher*, our reading for today, Naomi Novik’s *Spinning Silver*, takes elements of a medieval past and reinterprets and “re-contextualizes” them
 - More specifically, *Spinning Silver* and these works engage in what is called “medievalism.”
 - Ask if someone can provide a definition of “medievalism”
 - Provide a couple of definitions of medievalism that point to its reinterpretable qualities
 - Workman definition: Medievalism is “the continuing process of creating the Middle Ages” (29)
 - Re-interpreting the past for present concerns: imprinted with contemporary influence, concerns, interpretations

10 minutes: Brainstorm Activity

- Show the class 3 pictures of different examples of medievalism and ask students to use these images to identify some elements/tropes of medievalism. Possible examples include:
 - Folklore (magic, dragons, monsters)
 - Chivalry (castles, knights, quests, courtly love)
 - Idealized quality of a shared, cultural past
 - Feudal order (roles in society; class, but can also mention gender, religion, race, etc.)
- Discuss Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* as an example of medievalism
- Discuss Rumpelstiltskin as a related example and connect these examples to pernicious contemporary medievalisms such as Crusader imagery at the Unite the Right rally (anti-immigration/anti-Muslim)
- Transition to text: tell them that many of these tropes can be found in *Spinning Silver*, perhaps even in its very first paragraph...

15 minutes: Close reading activity

- Create a handout with the first paragraph of the novel in very large font. Pass out the worksheet, and ask one student to read the passage aloud. While the student reads, have everyone markup what they notice as they listen. Repeat. Discuss what words and phrases the students pulled out of the passage and why.
- Discussion Questions:
 - What words did you notice while your classmate read the passage?
 - Why did you notice those words specifically?
 - What do you notice in this passage that relates to our discussion of medievalism?
 - Why do you classify these themes as pertaining to medievalism?
 - Where else in the book do we see these themes/why does the author perhaps introduce moneylending in this way and why is moneylending important/medieval?

13 minutes: Lecture on antisemitism and medievalism

- Provide students with historical context for the antisemitism represented in *Spinning Silver*
 - Religion explanations for antisemitism were common and not unique to Christians. Romans were also prejudiced against Jewish people, for example. But Christians blamed Jewish people for the death of Jesus (despite Jesus himself being Jewish and the Romans actually perpetrating the crucifixion). This led to the spread of (fake!) stories about desecration of the host (wherein the consecrated host was supposedly stolen and attacked by Jews) and blood libel (where Jews supposedly kidnapped and killed Christian children for their blood).
 - But sometimes antisemitism was way bigger or even way smaller--like what we see in *Spinning Silver*
- History of antisemitism
 - Pogrom (organized massacre of an ethnic group of people)
 - People's Crusade (1096), where thousands of Jewish people in the Rhineland were killed as a prelude to the First Crusade
 - Specifically killing Jewish people--this was the plan

- But plenty of Jewish people were also killed in the other Crusades, especially in the Levant
- Scapegoats
 - Jewish people were blamed for the Black Death--Jews kept different practices and tended to be sequestered in ghettos, so they were more protected when the plague started sweeping through Europe
 - Ask students if they can think of any examples of Jews being scapegoated in the novel. For example, the idea that the Jews and the Stryk are in league (p. 42).
 - Some laws even prevented Jews from holding certain jobs. Because of this--and because of a certain religious laws--Jewish people often became involved in exchange.
- Exchange
 - Ask students what sort of exchanges do we see in the text? Why might that be?
 - Usury: lending money with interest
 - It's a sin! Forbidden among Christians, Jewish people, and Muslims
 - But it's okay to lend money with interest to people outside your religion--so Christians couldn't lend to Christians, but Jews could lend to Christians
 - Moneylending
 - Because Jewish people could lend to Christians, they often found employment as moneylenders
 - Money lending was a profitable profession, one that required intellectual labor rather than physical work--and one that was easy to pick up with you if you had to move.
 - Because of the threat of expulsion, Jewish people would often keep liquid assets rather than buying land--money could be brought with you if you had to flee to another country, but land couldn't
 - Because Jewish people then lent money with interest, they were stereotyped as greedy
 - And because people didn't want to pay back what they owe, they would look for ways to get out of the deal or get around it--sometimes leading to expulsion
 - Sometimes this was on a huge scale--the entire Jewish population was exiled from entire countries multiple times in the Middle Ages--such as England in 1290, France in 1396, and Austria in 1421
 - Jewish people were often invited to move to a new place to help kickstart the economy with the money they lent . . . only for people to then drive them out when things were going well
 - In *Spinning Silver*: p. 57, 80
 - Ask students: where do we see echoes of this attitude in the text?

- Example: Oleg attacking Miryem, p. 93

2 minutes: Conclusion

- *Spinning Silver* is a piece of medievalism that extends its portrayals of medieval phenomena and attitudes beyond those typically found in fantasy
- *Spinning Silver* asks modern readers to empathize with women from very different positions in society and across different aspects of the feudal system

Sources:

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

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