The Uses of Fantasy Fiction for Transformational Learning and Personal Growth

Zahava Schwartzman

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By: Zahava Schwzrtzman

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Chair's name

Ailie Cleghorn Examiner
Examiner's name

Miranda D'Amico Examiner
Examiner's name

Arpi Hamlian Supervisor
Supervisor's name

Approved by Ailie Cleghorn
Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

November, 2016

Dean of Faculty

ABSTRACT

The Educational Benefits of Using Fantasy Fiction in the Classroom as a Tool for Transformational Learning and Personal Growth

Zahava Schwartzman

In this thesis I explore the concept of transformational learning through the reading of and immersion into the world of fantasy fiction with an application to my own biography. I explore the way fantasy literature has played a part in my own self-discovery and aim to explain how fantasy fiction can be used for educational and not merely entertainment purposes. By exploring the works of theorists such as Mezirow, Greene, Freire and Dashiell, amongst others, I try to make the case for fantasy fiction to become another tool with which classroom teachers can teach intangible concepts to their students such as integrity, passion, valour, and compassion. I also explore the value of fantasy fiction and imagination as integral parts of learning. I then discuss the way fantasy fiction compares to and integrates with our ordinary world in order to bring about an extraordinary learning experience. Finally, I posit that with the integration of fantasy literature into the classroom, we may open up, for some students and teachers, yet another way of acquiring or imparting knowledge in a safe, neutral environment, where ideas can be shared and discussed openly, leading to transformational experiences in learning and self-discovery.

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To Arpi, for your patience and hand-holding

and

to Robin, for your limitless imagination

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Chapter One - Introduction

Background and Statement of the Problem

Not all valuable education takes place in the classroom. I know this emphatically because much of my own education has been acquired from without. As a working woman I learned that you must sometimes filter the thoughts you feel towards your boss or you might get fired. As a mother I learned that little children will do whatever it takes to get that toothpaste open, even if it means slicing their hand open with a steak knife in the process. As a sister, I learned that distance need not equal closeness, and as a friend I learned that sometimes relating my own stories can provide the very inspiration that others are looking to hear. These are not things a classroom might have taught me and so informal education has made up a great part of who I am and has, for better or worse, shaped me into the woman I am today. It has been my touchstone.

Clearly, however, I have achieved a certain level of formal education or else I would not be so privileged as to be able to write for you now, but I do want to acknowledge the great part that informal education has taken in shaping the way that I interact with and view the world today. It is why I have chosen to explore informal education and its transformative power in my master's thesis for Educational Studies. I believe the two go hand in hand. I have found throughout my life that the best learned lessons were the ones I never saw sneak up on me – the ones which constantly took me by surprise and in doing so, made me realize that I had so much unrealized potential. I found that much of that came through reading. Not just academic reading, in fact, it was hardly academic reading at all. Because even though academic texts certainly hold their value in terms of memorization and acquisition of facts, academic texts do not have, at least for this learner, transformational potential.

As far as I have been able to tell, the biggest credit for my transformational learning has been attributed to leisure reading and more specifically, within the fantasy genre. In it, I have been exposed to strong female characters who have lit a fire in me, promising me, with their actions and convictions, that I too have untapped potential and am strong enough to face all odds. I have learned, through literature, that though I may not be pleased with the consequences of my actions, that I do indeed have some measure of control where my own life path is concerned. I can *make* things happen as opposed to simply allowing life to *happen to me*. And like those "a-ha!" moments that Oprah Winfrey so famously tells about throughout her own powerful and influential career, through exposure and interaction with fantasy literature, I found that I was able to transform my once linear mindset into one which now holds so many possibilities. In other words, by simply questioning what it was that made those strong women protagonists so brilliant and successful in their own worlds, I was able to apply their strategies to my own life and thus, affect change.

Indeed, there is something about the in-between space – that non-judgmental space in the mind – which is completely relaxed and open when you read – that allows new ideas to seep through and expand there. It changes you. And before you know it, as you are being swept away, the characters' convictions become your own. Whether or not you agree with their actions, you find yourself angry, sympathetic, happy, or sad – but definitely changed – and hopefully for the better. *That* in-between space is the very spot in which transformational learning becomes possible and literature is the safest, most ready, and non-physically limiting space in which transformational learning might happen. In the educational studies classroom, literature is an area often overlooked by educators despite the wealth of opportunity it, as a medium for learning, provides. Countless lessons have been absorbed through literature simply

by relating to the written word, borrowing lessons from within, and applying those lessons to one's own existence. In my opinion, literature has the power to shape and mold people's lives for better or for worse – with or without prejudice. I should know. I myself have benefitted from the lessons learned through literature for as long as I can remember.

The two fantasy tales that stood out the most for me when I was growing up have many things in common. Both center around young female protagonists, both show women with agency, both have formidable adversaries who are also female (not to mention adults), both are coming-of-age tales and both are exceptions to the common fairy tale trope that things *happen to* women/girls (such as in Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast or Maid Marion in the tale of Robin Hood). No. Where these two tales are concerned, unlike any other that I can think of, the female protagonists *make* things happen rather than simply allow things to happen to them. As such, they are able to shape their own destinies in the process – a highly respectable feat indeed. Have you guessed which tales they are?

If you deduced these two tales are Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865/1996) and C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* you'd be correct. In the former, we see a young girl (Alice), determined to grow up faster than society would allow, eager to sit at tea and struggling to exercise some measure of control over her own destiny. In her ordinary world, Alice cannot join the adults for tea. She is too young. Inexperienced. Naïve. But – in Wonderland, Alice challenges societal norms even as she is, herself, challenged. She is made to learn real life lessons through her interactions with the wacky and bizarre characters she meets down the rabbit hole. The Cheshire Cat reminds her that if she does not know where she is going, it hardly matters which road she takes to get there. The Caterpillar insists she figure out who she is as he repeatedly admonishes "You. Who are *you*?" (Carroll, 1865/1996). And even

the Queen of Hearts herself teaches Alice a valuable lesson about adults – namely that adults don't always do things that make sense and can even border on tyranny and irrationality at times. All this – and more – Alice must internalize and digest if she is ever to grow up and be invited to "tea." In order to accomplish her goal of joining in with the grownups, Alice must first learn to decode this complicated, unpredictable race of people who are at once nonsensical, enigmatic, elitist, and peculiar, and figure out how *they* have managed to come to rule the world when all the wisdom of childhood has abandoned them. (Hers is an upward battle).

In the case of C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), Lucy Pevensie stars at the protagonist who enters the fantasy world and succeeds in saving the kingdom on account of her unwavering faith. She is bold and brave, going where she should not go, doing what she should not do, believing in people whom do not always deserve her support, and seeing them through their foibles even as she forgives them all their multitude of follies. Lucy stands up for what she believes in and comes to her renegade brother's defense even when Edmund has clearly been in the wrong. She petitions for Aslan's help and refuses to give up on the faun who ultimately betrays her. Lucy is an active player in her saga, as is Alice in hers. Both girls exhibit strength of character and defy the gendered stereotypes of their respective eras simply by virtue of the fact that they are major players in the shaping of their own destinies, not allowing life to *happen to* them, but instead taking charge of where their lives may be going. It is the very foundation of what this paper is about: i.e., that fantasy literature is a valuable alternative for illustrating the principles of transformative learning in the field of adult education.

Indeed, when we study adult education teaching methods we are urged to consider the plethora of different teaching methods which are already employed in order to appeal to different learning styles. Examples of what we have already seen in adult education classrooms as

teaching methods are lecture, group work, media and social media integration, mock-teaching, class discussion, writing essays, and reading relevant texts. But more often than not, in adult education curriculum, we are reading theory-based and not literature-based texts. Many of us are reading about Transformational Learning without having ever *experienced* it ourselves. This suggests that in an educational studies context, curricula can only be effective if they are designed using text books related to the theoretical study of a particular subject matter. I, however, feel that there is a gap in the market. Literature, or more specifically, the novel, can also be used as a teaching tool in educational studies classrooms (as opposed to only using theory or philosophy based texts) as a way to understand the learning theory itself. Literature is a limitless medium through which students can explore the realm of transformational learning by experiencing it themselves. Literature is also essential for personal education because it provides alternative ways for the reader to imagine themselves in and around foreign situations and leads to transformative learning based on intrapersonal growth. Additionally, fantasy stories can also be useful in helping the individual manage themselves within a society (as it does with Alice) and it is especially useful because it helps us focus on how to deal with daily life situations in their own context. Therefore, through interactions with Fantasy Literature, we are able to learn and grow as individuals. And though we may not have a person with whom to share our particular feelings in any given moment, the safe space of Fantasy Literature provides countless opportunities for the reader to resonate with characters living and breathing examples of what dealing with life's struggles is all about.

Research Question and Purpose

Because I have chosen to write my thesis as an autobiographical study of how literature has played (and continues to play) an important role in my life as one of my primary learning

tools for transformational learning, I will focus this thesis on the study of strong female characters in fantasy novels, showing how these characters and their trajectories have the ability to provide palpable, cathartic, and everlasting learning experiences for some women readers. I will show that even if, in real life, the reader may not ever have had the chance to encounter similar situations as the strong female characters in those novels do, the sheer exposure to the problems and situations the characters must face and the way they themselves deal with those issues, nonetheless impact the reader simply because the reader has invested so much of their time into getting to know those characters, if only on a subconscious level. As a result of that energy investment, as well as the investment of time and money, the experience becomes personal.

As such, the question I wish to explore in this paper is the way fantasy literature has helped me, as a woman, to learn and grow, react to and interact with myself and the outside world. What life lessons have I learned through fantasy literature? Why that particular genre? How has exposure to the strong female characters in fantasy literature transformed my own learning experience over the last 20 years of my life? And what could this mean for other women?

In order to explore these issues, I will first explore some of the current literature and theory on society and transformational learning. I will consult the works of Greene (1986), Egan (2003) Dashiell (1995) and others so that we can see how fantasy literature is already being used as part of regular teaching practices in adult education classrooms and I will compare and contrast novels that have had an effect on my own life and learning trajectory in an autobiographical portion in which I will delve into details about strong women protagonists and their own personal journeys.

But before we delve into the Literature Review portion of this essay and explore the questions outlined above, I do wish to provide a small disclaimer: in order to properly discuss the subject at hand, it shall be necessary, at times, to expose certain facets of the plot of some of the novels that I will be discussing and as such, I apologize in advance for any spoilers contained herein. Trust me when I say that the novels are well worth reading and I hope that I do not give away too much or perhaps that I give away just enough to get you to head out to the bookstore or, at the very least, to download the epic and voluminous tales onto your handy electronic readers.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

Fantasy, Imagination and Learning

As I have decided to write an autobiographical piece which revolves around how fantasy literature has helped to mould and shape my own educational path, I thought it pertinent to specify the type of fantasy literature that I will be examining in order to differentiate it from the flood of material which is widely available on the market. This is because I wish to focus on a particular type of fantasy literature known as *high fantasy.*

According to University of British Columbia researchers Brian Laetz and Joshua J. Johnston (2008) in their paper entitled *What is Fantasy?*, there are at least three types of fantasy literature, namely: Sword and Sorcery (such as what can be found in the *Dragonlance* series of novels by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman), High Fantasy (think Tolkien) which consists of a clear quest and a group of adventurers, usually human, to whom the events of the novel revolve around and lastly, Dark Fantasy which, according to Laetz and Johnston (2008), is largely "preoccupied with graphic depiction of violence and sexuality" and thus is intended for adult audiences specifically (p.169). In their paper, Laetz and Johnston (2008) also point out that not all works of fiction can fall into the fantasy literature category or in other words, become a part of the genre. This is because certain elements are required of the novel in order for it to be considered a fantasy novel and which separate it from mainstream fiction. They point out four major qualifications which are as follows[1]:

1. The stories must be fictional in nature and in essence. Though certain elements of the fantasy must be relatable to our own world, and thus remain similar in some aspects, in order for the story to be considered a fantasy, nonetheless, there

[1] Laetz, B. and Johnston, Joshua J. "What is Fantasy?" 2008. *Philosophy and Literature* 32(1), 161-172. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

must be some tangible lack of reality. The reader should understand that the story is not real.

2. Fantastic elements (or the sorts of things which make the world fantastic such as wizard, witches, dragons and other mythical or supernatural creatures) must be noticeable in the work and not simply portrayed as minor details. In other words, theses supernatural characters should be central to the plot line in some way and not simply told about or referred to in passing. For example, a fictional tale may depict a central character relating the story of a curse which a witch has cast on the village however the witch herself may not be a major player in the story as she is only referenced briefly. Were that witch to play a more major role in the story – one in which she may take significant action or wield some sort of agency – then we could consider the tale one of fantasy.
3. The kinds of things that make the world fantastic must not be viewed solely as symbols for things which are not. In other words, though they can be symbolic at times, these elements (think magic, presence of supernatural beings, etc.) should generally be taken at face value and not questioned overmuch.
4. Lastly, fantasy literature requires that the "relevant content must not solely be mocked or lampooned within the work" (p.162). In keeping with the above definition, any relevant content may be made fun of but must ultimately maintain some serious aspect because, again, the reader is meant to take the work seriously, or as seriously as one can, considering its context.

Thus, it is important to explore the very nature of fantasy literature for this paper because much of my thesis argument is built around the fact that when a person is immersed in the genre of fantasy literature, they have already accepted the suspension of their disbelief. In so doing, they have opened their subconscious minds to absorbing information that the psyche would otherwise discount as real. People who read fantasy literature (or watch fantastic movies or television series) expect the fantastic, supernatural and uncommon. They read the genre to *escape* their everyday lives. And so lessons learned within the books seep into an otherwise closed mind because the mind, as a person reads fantasy, is open and already exposed to limitless possibilities. Imagination, therefore, is paramount to the successful implementation of learning for without imagination, we cannot aspire to things other than what we know and that lack of aspiration will eventually cause us to come to a halt, as we will lack the will to grow. It is why imagination is so important to learning.

Indeed, from the time we are young, we are encouraged to play make-believe. We are read fantastic tales of talking monkeys and anthropomorphic creatures that live in the woods, solving everyday problems and seeking human advice. Through literature, a child's imagination is fed and foddered, taunted and teased. We start out as blank slates and are given what we know. We learn by soaking up what is told and by making sense out of what we've learned versus what we see. And imagination is key to grasping these concepts because we do not always *know* things to be true but instead, must *believe they could be* if we are to move forward and learn more. More practically speaking, if one were faced with a large mountain in front and nothing but barren fields behind, imagining what lay on the other side of the mountain might be just enough motivation for a starving person to climb up and over the mountain. Though there is no certainty of what actually lies beyond, the possibility of there being salvation is enough to propel the human forward. If she stays stagnant, however, she is certain to perish. But imagining salvation is enough to lead her there.

Author and educational theorist Kieran Egan (2003), in his article entitled *Start with What the Student Knows or with What the Student can Imagine*, discusses how imagination is fundamental to the learning process of every individual. He criticizes research already being done by educational theorists as he points out that too often, imagination is overlooked when discussing theories on learning and laments that "ignoring imagination because our research methods have difficulty coming to grips with it is somewhat self-defeating [as] connections are made by metaphorical leaps, not by logical connections" (p.445). In saying this, Egan (2003) proves concern for how educational research is being conducted and states that imagination, which is both significant and often ignored during examination and study of learning, is actually an integral part of the learning process and furthermore, is developed most fruitfully in

childhood. Let's think back to my earlier argument about the person facing the mountain. Egan (2003) argues:

> Imagination is the ability to think of things as possibly being so [...] For teaching, we need not be constrained by trying to make content associations with knowledge students already have, for there are other ways of expanding knowledge. For the curriculum, we need no longer be constrained to tie knowledge to the everyday experience of students, which can be very dreary for them, but can recognize that their imaginations allow much freedom in how they can go about grasping the universe of knowledge (p.445).

Here we see that Egan (2003) is an advocate for the usefulness and necessity of imagination in the acquisition of knowledge as he impresses upon us that we must look further than the mere sum of what a student has been told in order to calculate his or her knowledge. Instead, Egan (2003) posits that imagination is another way of calculating a student's potential knowledge because in accounting for a student's imagination factor, one can attest to their intelligence, ability to problem solve, likelihood of survival in a precarious situation or countless other incidences.

Another point of reflection may be the faerie tales most of us know from our childhoods. As tales were told to us and as we were often read to from books without pictures, our imaginations were allowed to run wild – and more than that – were *encouraged* to do so. If we were told stories of ghosts, witches and goblins whose images were absent from the page, we were reliant on our imaginations to make those stories – those experiences – come alive. I for one am still imagining Jabberwockies of all kinds, even in my adult life. But my imagining of situations being worse than they actually are has more often than not compelled me to action or allowed me to open my mind up to possibilities in real life situations which I may not have considered and so I can be prepared to handle them as they come, thus ensuring my own survival.

Madoc-Jones and Egan (2001) in their paper entitled *On the Educational Uses of Fantasy* note that there is little difference between children traveling by bus or children traveling by magic carpet if the point of the adventure is to have the subjects move from point A to point B. Indeed, they question whether or not the latter mode of transport feeds illusory longing for a world the children can never attain or if it opens the mind up to new possibilities which enable them to think about their world more effectively (Madoc-Jones & Egan, 2001). And I would say it does both. As someone who has longed to ride a magic carpet herself from time to time, I also realize that my penchant for making lasting, impressive and dramatic escapes will not always help me deal with real world, real life situations. So the discounting of the magic carpet as a viable escape solution (or mode of transport) for myself, enables me to stay grounded and make wiser, if not tougher decisions, in this, real world while at the same time, motivating me towards believing that solutions are indeed possible. As such, I come to a greater, more in-depth understanding of myself. Madoc-Jones and Egan (2001) see the same trend in young learners.

> One important value for children in dreaming up fantasies, as in reading literature, lies in what fantasy can do in helping [a child's] development. Thus we might encourage fantasies which involve playful re-descriptions of the world and lead to asking questions about the child's self-understanding. Such questions typically project a world of new possibilities for the child to play with, to consider, to try out […] However, they also allow a more important form of imaginative fantasy, which entails the child not seeing something as if it were something else, but imagining herself as something or somebody else (p.14).

So it would seem that we are predisposed to learning through the imaginative process and this type of learning can be none other than transformational in its very nature. As the theorists point out, imagination has the power to transform the way a learner thinks from a very young age without the subject even realizing, most times, that it has been or is being transformed. Imagination is a propeller to further growth and evolution. It can make the difference between

climbing up a mountain to see what's on the other side or standing still in a barren field and waiting around to perish.

We have talked about how imagination has transformational potential in children and I argue that this is no less true for any adult learner. As children do through faerie stories, adults, through literature, can also be made to learn and transform as they engage with and compare what they already know to the lessons learned when they internalize what has been given in the text. But what has this all to do with the study of learning? And how does literature play its role? In order to further explore these questions, we must first examine transformational learning itself and distinguish it from other types of learning theories so that we can better appreciate the valuable tool that literature is for teaching.

Understanding Transformational Learning

As we have seen, for this thesis in Educational Studies I am making the argument that literature (in this case, fantasy literature) helps to mould and shape one's own personal educational trajectory and thus has the ability to incite change in an individual on a transformational level. As such, I would like to begin by exploring the nature and various definitions of transformational learning so we can better understand how fantasy literature as a method of teaching is relevant to adult education and lifelong, life-wide learning.

Patricia Cranton (2006) defines transformative learning as "a process by which individuals or social groups undergo a deep shift in perspective that leads them to a more open, permeable, and better justified *frame of reference* [and which] can be based upon critical reflection and critical self-reflection and/or imagination, intuition, [and/or] emotional awareness" (p101). Lange (2013) writes that frames of reference are comprised of *perspectives on meaning* which help to define our world view. For example, "family" to one person may not have the

same definition as "family" would to the next. In one case, "family" may simply mean blood relatives, whereas in another case, "family" may extend to close friends and acquaintances or even to an entire tribe or group of people. It would all depend on the context and on the frames of reference that the subject has come to know.

Cranton (2006) and Lange (2013) have discussed two very important elements which are integral to the proper understanding of the mechanics of transformational learning. Cranton (2006) is concerned with *frames of reference* which allude to what we, as human beings, were first taught by the societies in which we grew up and which are, in fact, the boundaries within which we have, thus far, learned to define our world. For example, a religious person may be brought up to observe the Sabbath as a holy day and may grow up observing the Sabbath for all of their lives, never knowing any different. But if that person were to live secularly for a while, they may come to understand the way secular people live and they may decide that the religion they were brought up in is no longer of value or importance to them. Having acquired new, outside information, they have been able to add that to and interpret that within the frames of reference (their religious history, in this case) that they know and in reflecting upon their new knowledge, can then make a more educated decision as to what it right for them – the very critical reflection and self-awareness that Cranton (2006) speaks about above.

Lange (2013) then goes on to further explain that "transformative learning involves examining the very premises of one's thought system and confronting realities that no longer fit within one's existing world view" (p.109). In other words, in order for an adult to be considered to have undergone an instance of transformational learning, their existing ideas must undergo a drastic shift in meaning and perspective, leaving them with new ideas, new perspectives and a changed way of viewing their world. If we were to refer to the example above we could say

about that same religious person, who once believed "family" to be simply a matter of blood relation, after having had a meaningful experience, say by living with another group of people whose frame of reference for "family" extends to a greater circle than simply the blood relative, then the person in question may experience a shift in understanding. With this new understanding, learning has taken place.

Another example of this shift in perspective is one which is a little closer to home. For the last three years now, we have taken on high school exchange students from countries all over the world. One in particular came from a home in which family was simply a matter of being a place you were born into. But during her exchange year, this student came to be a part of our own family. The love and affection, attention and support that we gave to her (as well as she to us) became a part of an everyday routine and as our family includes a close circle of friends whom we consider "family," but who are not blood relatives, the student was able to adopt them as her Canadian family as well. In turn, and because we have kept in touch, I learned that upon her return to her home country of Switzerland, this particular student, having been so affected by the warmth and unconditional acceptance of her new, Canadian family and friends, felt saddened by her return to her own family. Having gone through this penultimate of educational experiences (and perhaps again because of her age – at the time, she was seventeen) the student was forever changed. Indeed, upon her return, she expressed a longing for the Canadian way of life (one which, to her, was full of laughter, warmth, caring and extensive love) as compared to the static and perfunctory mannerisms of her own, natural family. Thus, this student experienced a complete redefinition in her frame of reference of what a family should be like. And as it made sense to her, she was forever changed. Her Canadian exchange was transformational in nature and provided her with a worldly education like no other. She went from an ordinary world, to an

extraordinary one and came back to her ordinary world forever changed. This is what reading fantasy literature has done for me as it provides a vehicle through which I can be taken from my ordinary world, into the extraordinary world and allows me to learn lessons in the extraordinary world which I then bring back and apply to this, more ordinary one. (Not everyone is made for travel).

Supporting Cranton (2006) and Lange (2013), Mezirow (1997), in his article entitled *Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice*, explains transformational learning as "the process of effecting change in a *frame of reference."* He writes:

> Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience—associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses—frames of reference that define their life world. Frames of reference are the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They set our "line of action." Once set, we automatically move from one specific activity (mental or behavioral) to another. We have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions, labeling those ideas as unworthy of consideration—aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird, or mistaken. When circumstances permit, transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience" (p.5).

As such, adults, having previously acquired a varied degree of experiences throughout their lives, may come to understand those experiences differently through transformational learning. The frames of reference from which adult learners qualify the life experiences to which Mezirow (1997) refers, continue to change and evolve over time and exposure to new information. It is that interaction with and reflection upon those changing frames of reference – which are created by the particular society in which the person exists – that enable adult learners to take part in transformational learning.

In essence, adults will come to a situation with a preconceived set of notions/thoughts/values/opinions, all interpreted through an original frame of reference and, as the result of having been introduced to a newer frame of reference – one which the adult has not heretofore been familiar with – will re-examine those very same ideals, only now, with a new view point. Transformational learning occurs when the learner reflects upon this newer viewpoint, internalizes that reflection and hopefully comes to have a lasting and meaningful change in perspective. Thus having experienced transformational learning, the learner has taken part in an important evolutionary experience.

With regards to adult learners, Mezirow (1997) warns that "we do not make transformative changes in the way we learn as long as what we learn fits comfortably in our existing frames of reference" (p.7). This is an important element which cannot be overlooked if we want transformational learning to occur and be sustainable. In essence, in order to transform, or for transformational learning to ensue, we must first step out of our comfort zones, both as individuals and as a society (or as individual societies) or this type of evolutionary learning would simply not be possible.

Another important factor to consider is an adult learner's sense of pride and mastery of their own craft. Mezirow (1997) points out how adult learners tend to like to envision themselves as autonomous, responsible thinkers. More specifically, he writes, adult learners tend to view *learning to think* as an important educational objective in itself (Mezirow, 1997).

> New information is only a resource in the adult learning process. To become meaningful, learning requires that new information be incorporated by the learner into an already well-developed symbolic frame of reference, an active process involving thought, feelings, and disposition. The learner may also have to be helped to transform his or her frame of reference to fully understand the experience (p.10).

Transformational learning, therefore, requires an *entirely different* type of education as compared to that which is commonly associated with children, or which is largely pedagogical in nature. One must be able to think critically in order to be able to self-reflect. Simply piling knowledge upon already existing knowledge without the ability to interact with or reflect upon it is not enough. It is that very process of reflection and interaction or questioning which makes the transformation possible in the learner.

So we can see by these arguments that transformational learning serves a greater, more philanthropic purpose and can have a great effect on societies as a whole when individual learners gain new perspectives on, or become more conscious of, larger social issues to the point where they may incite change. At this point in the study, it seems a good opportunity to delve further into the subject of how transformational learning can be beneficial to societies at large by reviewing some of the work and theories of educational philosopher Paulo Freire.

Freire and the Social Implications of Adult Education

In one of his major oeuvres, *Literacy and the Possible Dream*, Paulo Freire (1976) notes that educational systems are "created and re-created by the social practices which constitute a given society" (p.68) which, in my opinion, constitutes the construction of the *frames of reference* we discussed earlier. Thus, the society in question must determine the educational trajectory its people are encouraged to follow and this requires a great deal of power. Therefore, in any given society, education (and its process) may be skewed. It is a double-edged sword. As Freire (1976) notes, "it is not systematic education which somehow moulds society, but on the contrary, [it is] society which, according to its particular structure, shapes education in relation to the needs and interests of those who control the power in [that] society" (p.68). So rather than arguing that people rebel against the education they are given, Freire suggests that people mould

the education they are given according to their needs as a society. It is a question of the chicken and the egg. An adult needs to be educated in order to mould, change and advance in his own education – as does any particular society – but in order to accomplish that, he needs to have had at least a basic education which the very society he is trying to change would have given him. Furthermore, and in keeping with Freire's (1976) argument, the role of a systematic education in any particular society is meant to preserve and protect that society. In rebelling against systematic education, learners can be opened up to new ways of thinking and viewing the world and this is also possible through literature. Fantasy (and indeed all types of literature) as well as exposure to the arts (think movies, television shows) does indeed open up new ways of viewing and interacting with the ordinary world by providing outlets through which adults can develop new ways of thinking. For Freire (1976), these new ways of thinking may then elicit change and, in his view, perhaps bring society one step closer to freedom, lack of oppression or lack of control (Freire, 1976).

However, in order to have a radical change in education, one must first experience a radical change in society and vice versa. So we find ourselves again debating which came first, the chicken or the egg. Indeed, Freire (1976) is all too concerned about the order of things and in his attempt to sort out the matter of who controls whom or what, he writes:

> The role of systematic education, in the repressive society from which it stems and on which it acts as an agent of social control, is to preserve that society. Consequently, to conceive of systematic education as an instrument of liberation is simply to invent the rules of the game and, as we pointed out earlier, to endow education with an autonomous capacity for transforming society, the very process without which liberation as a permanent aspiration is meaningless (p.68).

Here Freire (1976) points out that if education of a particular society is meant to control them socially, for its own benefit and preservation, how can that same society be responsible in

determining its own educational trajectory? And if the society *is* indeed responsible for its own educational path, how does it know what it needs in order to grow and evolve without having received some sort of "outside" education? A very basic example may be that if a society – one which does not often have access to new technologies. The introduction by an outsider to that particular society of a new way of farming or a simple machine technology may forever change the way that society functions. While this is not the place to be having a large anthropological discussion, the point is that the adoption and integration of new learning provides opportunity for growth in any given society and as human beings we seem predisposed to seek out new information in any case. In any society, no matter how closed off, there are bound to be one or two wanderers. It cannot be helped. It's human nature.

Freire (1976) supports his theory by noting that "education is both an expression and an instrument of society. But since social transformations are not mechanical, but historical facts, which constitute human situations, they involve practical actions which require a certain level of education" (p.68). In essence, education begets more education. At the end of the day, the individual must have a basic level of education to begin with in order to acquire more. Then, in obtaining further education, even *further* education may be earned or required as new understandings are reached on an individual, societal or even global level. Spencer (2006) notes that adult education has often been associated with social change, social action, social movements, community development, and participatory democracy. He notes that *transformation of consciousness* i.e. transformational learning, can be achieved through self-knowledge and reflection (Spencer, 2006). He writes:

> Being critically aware of one's own awareness and how it is constructed [is how perspective transformation is achieved]. Learners address problems through critical reflection and through examination of awareness and different meaning perspectives to see how that affects arguments and positions taken.

> Ideologies, power relations and cultural understandings are exposed, freeing individuals to adopt new visions and courses of action. […] Its emphasis on the individual learner, the psychological, on knowing oneself distances "perspective transformation" from social action (p.55).

Indeed, Spencer's (2006) argument supports how the individual comes to the process of transformational learning and supports Mezirow's (1994) view that learners do change over time and exposure to knowledge. But Spencer (2006) points out that Freire's work is essentially an educational philosophy, an argument about the purposes of education, and a guide to, or a way of thinking about, education (Spencer, 2006). "His purpose was to advance the argument that the 'culture of silence,' particularly associated with illiterate peoples, could be broken by people educating each other through the 'mediation of the world' guided by sympathetic adult educators" (p.59). "By re-naming the world," Spencer (2006) writes, "they would discover the connections between ideology and oppression and be in a situation to change it" (p.59). This is the reason that it is necessary to teach both child and adult learners about unions, farming, human rights and other grand societal issues. No matter the age of the learner in question, the change in the individual once they have become educated and, when multiplied by many individual learners, can then become a mitigating factor in changing the whole society.

Literature in the Adult Education Classroom

As we have explored above, many theorists believe it is the individual society which is responsible for the creation of its reality on all social levels. However, on an individual basis, transformational education can be achieved from many different sources – literature being just one. Once we accept this, we can better understand how exposure to literature may have a lasting, and transformational effect on adult learners. Though the people in question may not have physically displaced themselves nor have had someone alien come in to teach them, they

have, in a sense, crossed over into another world (the literary realm) and so are well set up to absorb all the lessons that this new educational space can impart onto them. Hence, it is worth it to take a look at how literature is already being used by contemporary adult educators in their classrooms, as fantasy literature, being a sub-genre of mainstream fiction, is subject to the same arguments as would be used to support any other type of literature in the curriculum and can therefore be considered as useful a learning tool in the adult educational classroom, for the purposes of transformational and reflective learning.

Professor and researcher Maxine Greene (1986) in her paper entitled *Qualitative Research and the Uses of Literature*, explores how the use of literature as a teaching tool in her own classrooms helps to open up her students' minds to create meaning (within their existing frames of reference) and interact with the world around them. This also helps to teach them problem-solving skills and echoes Mezirow's (1997) idea that adults like to consider themselves autonomous and responsible thinkers.

In keeping with the conclusions of Cranton (2006), Lange (2013) and Mezirow (1997), Greene (1986) explores how "informed confrontations with literary texts may (through the process of defamiliarization, perhaps) enable students to perceive their own illusions and stereotypes" (p.69) and thus interact with and challenge them. In essence, Greene (1986) is also concerned with a slight suspension of disbelief. In her view, students who cooperate with literary texts should be able to compare their own lives to those of the characters in the texts and thus be able to reflect upon their own lives in such a way as to disillusion themselves from an apparent reality. And her view supports my own. As Greene (1986) notes, "human beings are self-defining, self-creating." (p.79) This not only seems to echo Freire's philosophy in that you need basic education in order to gain more but it implies that human beings are predisposed to

the active seeking out of new information – which we have seen with our wandering members of an otherwise closed society.

But in order to truly define existing information and create new information, one must necessarily have something to compare the existing information against. In the case of the human being versus society, human beings are, for the most part, well aware of what society expects of them (i.e., go to work each day and contribute to the economy, send your children to school, do not steal, do not murder, etc.) These are truisms of the society in which this author lives – a North American, mostly equality oriented and relatively free one – and also the one in which she bases her research. However, no matter which society a person finds themselves belonging to, the principles of existence within that society remain largely the same: you as the individual must find your place within society and can only, up until a certain point, derive some sense of self-identity by comparing who you are (or who you know yourself to be) to the society in which you are living. As human beings, we do this naturally, subconsciously, unthinking. It is part of what creates the conflict which helps societies to evolve and a catalytic way to achieve this evolution is through education on a societal scale, as educational theorist Paulo Freire (1976) discusses in much of his work on the subject.

Furthermore, as Madoc-Jones and Egan (2001) point out, "in getting students to work with fantasy, we are not merely providing an opportunity for them to have a release from cognitive cramming, but we may in fact be bringing them nearer to a valuable way in which humans have made sense of themselves and the world since antiquity" (p.15). According to Greene 1986), "structuralist and semiotic thinkers [focus largely on] engagements with language, 'defamiliarize' what may have been taken for granted, and therefore effect some transformation of consciousness" (p.70).

> "But there is little concern in that approach for lived experience and diverse disclosures of meaning – the kind of disclosures that reach beyond the texts […] Writing always means more than it says; there can be no self-contained structures, no hierarchies, no solid foundations. […] This puts great stress on the ways in which the reader constitutes texts as meaningful and the ways in which imaginative texts disconform habitual modes of perceiving, thus making the reader acknowledge what they are [Iser,1978]. Moreover, according to this view, certain works 'interrogate' their readers and require them to transform ordinary beliefs and expectations. What may follow is a heightened self-consciousness and a willingness to be changed (p.70).

Here Greene (1986) has adequately summed up the very premise of transformational learning and has skillfully illustrated how literature can be a viable teaching tool in the adult educational classroom as literature has the potential to teach lessons subconsciously which can then be applied throughout one's lifetime.

Another advantage to the inclusion of literature as a teaching tool in an adult education classroom is that literature can be a highly subjective phenomena as individuals tend to respond to different literary texts in an endless permutation of private reflections and can even incite ownership of their own faults and misconceptions and perhaps more straightforwardly since these reflections are private in nature. True and sincere engagement with literature has the ability to force prolonged periods of self-reflection and thus can lead to more solid and sustainable instances of transformational learning. Greene (1986) uses literature as a teaching tool in her own classrooms regularly in order to achieve that very same effect:

> I ask students to take into account the multiple perspectives through which the novel can be viewed: the students' own perspectives as readers, aware of what it signifies to enter a fictional world; the perspective created by the narrative point of view (itself affected by the author's preunderstandings); the perspective of the […]society described in the text; the shifting and contesting and overlapping perspectives of the elders of that society […] As the reader moves through the book over time, as he/she looks through the multiple perspectives, he/she (as it were) variously ordering the materials of his/her own consciousness. The words, the levels of language, the symbols evoke memories, embedded images, perceptions, intuitions the reader attempts to order and synthesize under the guidance of the text. Inevitably, ordinary

> experience is defamiliarized. New modes of ordering, new vantage points may bring the unseen into visibility, may make the taken for granted palpable and strange (p.71).

Here, Greene (1986) illustrates just how the use of literature in her own classroom brings about subtle nuances which probe deeper than what may at first be imagined by the adult learner. As in my argument that fantasy literature suspends disbelief, and therefore invites new perspectives on learning, so does Greene (1986) argue that the novels she instructs provoke deep thought processes in her students, causing them to re-examine what they already know, interact with their own preconceived notions and come out of the process with a new way of looking at the world – the very essence of transformational learning.

But in order to come to the level of understanding that Greene (1986) is discussing or to come to any type of transformational learning, we must first accept the fact that *imagination* is required – is an integral process – in order for any type of learning to happen. Without imagination, we, as human beings are not able to evolve and thus, we are unable to rebel or to transform. Indeed, in order for any kind of evolution to happen, we must first be able to imagine solutions to any given problem in order to bring them about into our reality.

While investigating for my research, I was unable to find specific studies carried out which would support how fantasy literature might be considered a useful teaching tool for adults however two other themes emerged: 1) the use of fantasy literature as a teaching tool for children or adolescents and 2) the use of literature with no specific genre as a teaching tool for adult learners. One paper of note, written by P.M. Dashiell (1995) and published by Ohio State discusses whether or not adolescent girls, if given the chance to read modern high fantasy stories which feature strong female protagonists, will become more empowered. Dashiell (1995) notes

that fantasy and reality have many similarities and that it is those very similarities which make the genre so relatable.

> Fantasy is a genre of literature that weaves both reality and the supernatural to create world where the unknown becomes more recognizable than the known and the extraordinary is accomplished by the ordinary […] The ultimate power of fantasy has been said to lie in its paradox: that it is actually set within and based upon reality […] Fairy tales offer young children a place to externalize their interior processes in order to help them make sense of the thoughts and feelings they are experiencing (p.17).

Here, Dashiell draws a parallel as to how children and adolescents can borrow what they have learned through the reading of fantasy literature and, after making sense of it, apply it to their own lives because the similarities are tangible. As fantasy provides a framework for our own personal belief systems, such tales have the potential to liberate the reader from the things which they find to be oppressive (Dashiell, 1995). While adolescent girls, and women in general, do not have the same experience as the characters in the novels they read, the experiences they share will nonetheless be similar in nature. What happens then, is that the reader responds to the similarity of the phenomena rather than the actual lived experience. I too have found this to be true when reading fantasy fiction. True I will never be able to converse and interact with a sentient ship but I can learn much about how different people are motivated by different things and I can see how far a person will go in order to accomplish something they set their heart on doing. I can also learn about how to deal with disappointment. So just because a character in the novel does magical things, the lessons she learns are similar to those I would have to deal with in real life. Dashiell (1995) notes that "young literary heroines are searching for their voices. They refuse to remain silent and are willing to take risks in being heard […] they are ordinary girls who are willing to take on the extraordinary" (p.47) and this is something not only relatable to young women readers but is also something inspiring. But Baker (2006) points out that adult

fantasy and children's fantasy literature are not always equal as children's literature – such as that which would be found in the children's/adolescent section of your local bookstore – is often simplistic in nature. "In fantasy for children, the quest and journey is usually a quest for wholeness and identity [or] for maturity. 'Womanhood' or 'Manhood' is a goal achieved; after that, often, the story is over, the transition effected, the journey complete (Baker, 2006). High fantasy, on the other hand, is intended for adult or more mature readers. It has greater potential for transformational learning simply because of its subject matter, various themes, plotlines, involvement, provocativeness and complexity. It is no wonder that Greene (1986) considers literature to be a valuable device for the success of imaginative, inspirational and transformative learning. She writes:

> Those of us in search of educational understanding are concerned […] with the interpretations of particular kinds of human action in an intersubjective world […] Because of this, it seems to me that there can be no greater 'purity' in the interpretations made of actual situations than in those made of the unreal situations created by imaginative literature. I use works of imaginative literature in teaching educational history and philosophy of education, and I do so because of the sense of intelligibility they provoke and because of the way they involve students personally and intersubjectively in conscious pursuits of meaning […] I have found that informed encounters with literary texts permits students to confront their own lived realities in ways that have consequences for understanding what I hope to be their own projects – meaning their ways of gearing into and identifying themselves in the world (p.69).

Here, Greene (1986) defends imaginative literature's importance as a preferred and effective teaching method in her own adult educational classrooms. Her constant practice and reported success serve as evidence that it is not only children who benefit from the use of fantasy literature in the classroom but adults as well. Moreover, the use of imaginative works of literature in the classroom is not limited to the language arts classroom itself but can be multidisciplinary and multipurpose in nature. By crossing over into other subjects like Art History, Philosophy, Educational Studies and more, we can apply the skills we learn through

reading to many areas in our everyday lives – discussions of religion and politics are the two most urgent examples which come to mind. So we can see how through literature we can examine new ways of problem solving, study more about ourselves, and hopefully apply what we have learned through literature to our everyday lives (and for the betterment of society as a whole). In a similar way to Greene and Dashiell, Freire (1976) notes "such an education can only provide a lucid awareness of one's situation through the critical analysis of reality, which presupposes concrete and practical action within and on that reality" (p.69).

> In the case of American education, there are a number of imaginative works that move students to probe problems they might never have posed without the confrontations made possible by such works […] How *are* teachers to foster values like candor, integrity, decency, and compassion in a technological, pecuniary society? How *are* they to empower the young to function effectively in such a society and remain reflective and humane? How *are* they to free persons to name the world in their own vernaculars and at once take part in the culture's dialogue? Encounters with literature, in part because they become encounters with other consciousnesses, are apt to provoke such questions. They are not the kinds of questions answerable from the standpoint of the system or the institution, because imaginative works cannot deal except with realities made and interpreted (adequately or inadequately) from actor's vantage points (Greene 1986, p.72).

As Greene (1986) implores us to examine how literature can teach the intangible concepts of decency, integrity, compassion and the like, she reminds us that literature can also communicate invaluable lessons on bravery, courage and passion. Dashiell (1995) reminds us that "modern fantasy offers a bevy of young women who are willing to defy societal conventions and follow the life work they have chosen" and most heroines will do so at nearly any cost (p.46). And this can be no more apparent than in romance novels where young heroines are pitted up against any trial imaginable, only to come out on top.

Solomon (1998) believes that fantasy novels "can help promote a positive sense of self" while also increasing appreciation for the genre itself (Solomon, 1998).

> Books are places where girls could potentially find alternatives or solutions, in heroes/heroines that are strong enough to escape forced expectations. […] Girls need not only female characters, but need ones through whom they can vicariously experience accomplishments in circumstances paralleling some facet of their own […] Fantasy may be one genre in which girls may avoid obvious stereotyping (p.5).

High fantasy does, however, provide examples, as we have seen, where females may be notably strong. Solomon (1998) notes that though in faerie tales, impressions have been created in the past which seem to suggests that women fall into either one of two extremes: "[women] are either stunningly beautiful, or they are hags. […] Wit is an attribute not often displayed by characters of either sex, but males [in the works studied] always showed it more often than females" (p.15). As such, it would be beneficial for some sort of a role reversal in which male characters were seen to think, fear and emotionally react to similar situations as to the women.

Romantic Fiction and its Transformative Potential

In her articles entitled *Love Changes Everything: The Transformative Potential of Popular Romantic Fiction*, Christine Jarvis (1999) explores the realm of romance novels (which also have many subgenres – think western, fantasy, gothic, humor, horror, erotic, etc.) and discusses the empowering nature that these novels have on women readers as well as their social, transformative and educational power.

> Reading romance in an educational context can offer challenges to our interpretations of romantic discourses by bringing us into contact with others from different cultures, classes and races who will read the same situations differently. The discussion of a genre such as romance can have an interesting place, therefore, within a feminist adult education curriculum by encouraging a reflexive, yet critical engagement with common aspects of many women's experiences and, by making the operation of these extremely pervasive discourses more visible, creating opportunities for challenge and subversion. [With regards to her student research] The realization that

> romantic discourses are pervasive and naturalized stimulated a consideration of the relationship between texts and the wider social context (p.109-23).

Thus, Jarvis (1999) notes that literature taught in the classroom will bring about opportunities for discussion about differing perspectives on social situations or on ways to problem solve because students come from all races, religions and backgrounds and so have countless ways of examining situations. Literature provides a platform upon which these discussions can be made possible. Women from one race may not see things in quite the same way as women from another. Moreover, a woman in her fifties may view the novel differently than a woman in her early twenties. One thing Jarvis (1999) is sure of however is that "romantic fiction encodes women's dissatisfaction with and resistance to many aspects of their roles and relationships in a gendered society" (Jarvis, 1999) and that the use of romantic fiction as a tool for teaching is multi-faceted. In her study, Jarvis (1999) learned that many of the women surveyed who claimed to enjoy the genre, still wanted to change certain elements of the novels which they found they did not agree with (Jarvis, 1999).

> Class and poverty were important issues for many women because of the impact these had had on their own education and life chances […] several of the writing groups wrote about heroines who lacked the looks and the social position typical of Mills and Boon heroines. Many women found the youth and beauty of romantic heroines excluding and drew attention to their inability to identify with heroines because they were always impossibly perfect physical specimens. Comments on heroines' appearances more frequently concerned body-image than facial features (p.109-23).

Jarvis' (1999) study revealed how the women surveyed showed potential for heightened critical consciousness as the literature they had read was studied in ways that related to the lives of the students and after reading, "almost every woman reported an increase in assertiveness and the ability to stand up for herself" (p.109-123). I would argue this is much the same for high fantasy fiction literature. In fantasy/science fiction author Robin Hobb's epic fantasy tale series *The*

Liveship Traders (1998-2000), Althea Vestrit, the main protagonist, also suffers from body image issues. She is short and tomboyish, with rough hands and a stocky build. And though she is womanly, she is rough and tumble and prefers to wear trousers to skirts, to work the ship rather than attend a ball and to be in the simple and easy company of familiar things rather than put herself out on a limb or risk any measure of emotional exposure. Her niece Malta, on the other hand, is the perfect image of femininity and grace. As we are introduced to the lithe and beguiling teenage girl, we see that she is preoccupied with superficial things. It is easy then, for any woman reader to relate to either one character or the other. Any girl who has never been considered pretty and who is unlikely to be crowned prom queen would suffer the same disdain Althea feels for her niece Malta. In sympathising with the main female protagonist, the reader may have a cathartic enough experience to no longer feel alone should they share Althea's sentiments of disapproval. Secondly, in her story arc, Althea must realize her dream of captaining her family's liveship, Vivacia, and swears she'll do whatever it takes to make the ship her own. As a result, Althea is put through seemingly insurmountable trials and is shaken to her very core, overcoming challenges that even she wondered if she could overcome. In addition, there is a romantic element involved as Althea and Brashen become closer and more determined to each help each other get what they want.

Such themes and plot twists are both enticing and relatable to women readers and, as the reader becomes familiar with the characters and begins to sympathize with them, the reader comes to care for their fates. It is that caring which is internalized and processed both cognitively and emotionally and it's what makes the reader learn. Even if no scholastic or testable lesson has been learned on the academic scales, life lessons are learned, feelings of alienation dispelled, and coping methods can be mirrored to the reader through the actions of the

characters that they love and care about. Thus, a woman reading fantasy fiction is likely to experience the empowerment that Jarvis (1999) speaks about in her study. "Romantic discourses," she writes, "are so naturalized in women's lives that a curriculum which examines them has the capacity to promote critical reflection on connections which can be drawn between text and experience" (p.109-23). Jarvis (1999) then goes on to say that nearly all the women surveyed in her study, after having read a series of romantic fiction, reported an increase in their own personal assertiveness and ability to stand up for and defend themselves and possibly be inspired to change what they know of their own particular societies (Jarvis, 1999).

> The data reveal how close critical engagement with texts stimulates reflection on the relationship between culture and experience. This provided the opportunity to examine the kinds of resolutions cultural studies education can offer to one of the challenges which continues to confront feminist adult educators – the need to value women's experiences while seeking to build on these and make connections with social and political structures shaping and constraining those experiences. It suggests that reflexive engagement with popular and literary texts offers scope for examining and validating experience but also for challenging the way experience is constructed and understood. It can also confront us with some of the political implications of the social construction of experience. The students participating in this study demonstrated that as a result of working with popular texts which prompted critical reflection on their situations as women they became more politically conscious, particularly with respect to gender politics and that they felt empowered to challenge some of the dominant discourses which surrounded them.[…] Scrutinising these texts in a structured educational context made it possible to identify some of these issues and to consider the implications they had for our readings of our own lives and relationship (p.109-23).

Solomon (1998) critiques that "fantasy should give female readers substantial female characters to which those readers can not only relate, but which convey meaningful messages about what those readers *can* be, not what they *should* be" (Solomon, 1998). Even children may be affected by such lessons, and most profoundly – even more, one might argue than adults themselves. Exposure to literary themes like good versus evil, right versus wrong, family, politics, morals

and gender/sexism issues are often discussed in subtle, but no less empowering ways in the realm of fantasy fiction. Indeed, modern epic fantasy tends towards more powerful female characters as opposed to what it used to be decades ago. Echoing Solomon's concerns, Baker (2006) notes that epic fantasy has often been considered "the land of the male hero" (Baker, 2006). "Women may be good and brave," she writes, "but they are sidekicks…Women are seen in relation to heroes; as mother, wife, seducer, beloved, victim or rescuable maiden" (p.245). This is no longer true of modern day epic fantasy which, as we have seen, depicts brave and strong women who are breaking gender barriers and showing that women can do whatever they set their mind to and these are certainly ideas worth looking at and discussing in the classroom for both adults and children alike.

> The conscious consideration and questioning of gender definitions can alter kids' sense of who and what they might be as girls and boys, women and men. It can prod them to break out of the stultifying restrictions about sex and identity imposed upon them, drummed into them by our culture on every side. In the same way, the conscious questioning of conventional roles and plot structures can liberate readers to look critically at the way they construct their own stories – their own personal odysseys and heroic ideals (p.248).

So we can see how early exposure to literature can make available to young minds otherwise unattainable subject matter or opportunities for discussion. I would go so far as to say that children's exposure to literature is even more important than that of adults because often children are unable to verbalize what they feel and literature serves as a gateway to sorting out confusing emotions and helping children relate to a world which can be difficult, at times, to understand. According to Baker (2006) "it is in fantasy that we come closest to religion, to philosophy, in children's literature." Given the opportunity, I think children would be eager to discuss such "adult-like" subjects – a very empowering experience indeed.

Concluding Thoughts

According to Mezirow (1997), "becoming critically reflective of one's own assumptions is the key to transforming one's taken-for-granted frame of reference, an indispensable dimension of learning for adapting to change" (p.9). We have seen this idea both in Jarvis' (1999) study of the uses of reading romantic fiction in the classroom and in Greene's report on the teaching of literature in support of better learning to interact with one another across a multidisciplinary curriculum (1986).

Dashiell (1995) also points out that reading modern high fantasy may supply role models for young women that are similar to the readers themselves and therefore have the potential to teach lessons which may not otherwise be learned and that this has been true for at least three decades. Baker (2006) believes that the reading of high fantasy by a female reader who closely relates to a female protagonist loses "her self-consciousness and finds comfort and confidence in her physical being [being able to] exercise the power that has always been hers" (p.249). In her paper examining fantasy author Robin McKinley's fantasy fiction, Sanders (1996) notes that:

> Fantasy fiction is especially popular among young adolescents, both male and female, perhaps because it allows some escape from the problems of modern adolescence. If the escapist nature of fantasy fiction is appealing to young people, that quality of fantasy fiction also makes it a good vehicle for exploring contemporary social issues, including stereotypical gender roles […] Although certainly it is important for young adults to read realistic fiction that shows a balanced view of gender roles, fantasy fiction can serve a useful function in allowing young readers, particularly young female readers, to imagine themselves performing feat of physical strength, something that is not required of most young people in our society, unless they are talented athletes. In fantasy fiction, physical strength and bravery are often equated, and these books allow readers to imaginatively conquer their own more realistic dragons (p.38-42).

This, in itself is a ripe opportunity for transformational learning and for furthering a child's education and may even be ideal. Indeed, "the ideal conditions of learning are also the

ideal conditions of education. They are never achieved in real life but are important as standards against which to judge educational efforts and for setting norms that protect participants from the inequalities in power and influence that commonly corrupt discourse" (Mezirow, 1994, p.226). It is through learning, then, that we grow as a society and can therefore make changes to what we know. "Reflective action," he writes, "often involves overcoming situational, knowledge, and emotional constraints. Action in transformation theory means making a decision, not necessarily an immediate behavior change. Transformative learning which involves sociolinguistic perspectives will result in learners motivated to take collective social action to change social practices, institutions, or systems" (p.226).

> Educators should actively assist those already going through transformations in learning and may precipitate transformative learning as well. Educators can also facilitate reflective action by helping learners overcome situational, knowledge or emotional constraints […] Transformative learning is central to what adult education is all about. Adult development means the progressive realization of an adult's capacity to fully and freely participate in rational dialogue, to achieve a broader, more discriminating, permeable and integrative understanding of his/her experience as a guide to action (p.226).

In my view, the developmental process in adulthood centrally involves the process of transforming meaning structures. What makes fantasy literature so transformational in nature is the fact that as our system of beliefs is suspended for a brief time, learning can happen freely and without restriction. Solomon (1998) notes that "fantasy's defenders feel that exposure to fantastic tales in childhood will later help children to recognize and value more sophisticated literary genres" (p.1). This suggests that the reading of fantasy literature may not only engage and transform but may open up other areas of reflection and study as children grow up and come closer to adulthood. Even when in adulthood, fantasy literature has the power to change minds. Solomon (1998) notes that "Fantasy, as with science fiction, has often been referred to as a

"literature of possibilities." Its readers are challenged to see beyond what *is* and to envision what *could* be" (p.1). But it is when we pull away from the literature and are left with the lingering feeling of being displaced from a world we long to be a part of, that we are truly affected by its lessons and really feel a sense of loss. And that is a transformative lesson indeed.

Chapter Three – A Personal Relationship to Fantasy Literature

Learning from Fantasy Literature: A Personal Exploration of My Relationship to the Genre

Now that we have examined the literature defending the use of fantasy fiction as a teaching tool for furthering personal growth and as a vehicle through which we can better understand the phenomena of transformational learning, I would like, in this section, to take a closer look at how fantasy literature has affected me on my own personal journey and on my own educational trajectory. As a result, I have chosen to write this portion of my thesis as an autobiographical piece in which I hope to adequately display how the genre has affected my life and livelihood since my exposure to it. Fantasy literature has not only provided an alternative form of education (as compared to the one obtained in a traditional classroom setting) for me but has also taught me to stand up for myself – a phenomena which eventually gave me the courage to leave an emotionally (and sometimes physically) abusive relationship.

In her book *Becoming Qualitative Researchers,* Glesne (2011) likens biographical research to that of the "life history" and defines its use in qualitative research as one which is used largely to "illustrate perceptions and effects of particular historical events" (p.20). According to Glesne (2011), "a good life history illustrates the uniqueness, dilemmas and complexities of a person in such a way as it causes readers to reflect upon themselves and to bring their own situations and questions to the story" (p.20). For educational purposes, this self-questioning must then necessarily allow for learning. Thus, as someone who has spent much of her life listening to and learning from the stories told to me by other people, I am hoping, in this autobiographical account of my relationship with fantasy literature, to impart some of my own

wisdom, folly, and introspection onto other similar or interested learners so that they too can learn and grow. Furthermore, I have chosen to write this autobiographical piece because in addition to being slightly cathartic, I believe that through deep introspection one can come to know one's self more intimately and therefore stand a better chance at achieving inner growth and personal evolution.

The Novels

For the purposes of this thesis, and since there is such a flood of fantasy literature out there, I have chosen to concentrate solely on my personal relation to the one series which is dearest to me and from which I have learned the most: that is *The Liveship Traders* trilogy by fantasy novelist Robin Hobb. *The Liveship Traders* series is comprised of three volumes: *Ship of Magic* (1998)*, The Mad Ship* (1998) and *Ship of Destiny* (2000). It tells the story of a group of merchant sea traders, their fantastical "liveships" and their struggle towards personal and collective identity in a world being torn apart by gender stereotypes, political injustice, slavery, greed and power. The novels are bursting with vivid, visceral and highly complex characters who are often challenged beyond repair, causing me to experience a myriad of emotions and in whose lessons even I have absorbed much. I have chosen this series in particular because of the similarities between what the characters in the novels were going through in terms of their own personal struggles versus how I too was making my way through difficult lifecycle situations over the past two decades (and even up until today). But before we delve into the details of my relationship to the novels, I would like to give a brief history of how I came to know the fantasy genre and what it has meant for me since.

Getting into the Genre

My relationship with fantasy literature has always been somewhat of a sordid affair. It began when I was very young with the exposure to faerie tales and metamorphosed over time from simple, uncomplicated, matter-of-fact fables to an interest in a genre which is much more nuanced that I could have ever believed. As a child I was an avid reader. I began, as most children do, with nursery rhymes and faerie tales – anything from Mother Goose to The Brothers Grimm – and, as my reading level grew, fictional tales full of impossible things such as princesses who outsmart dragons (*The Paperbag Princess* by Robert Munsch) or little boys who become the king of all beasts (*Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak) captured my attention and made my imagination soar to incredible heights. By the time I was in the fifth or sixth grade, I had read countless tales of wonder and fancy and shifted over to a newer genre called "horror," this one specifically geared towards adolescent readers, in which I hungrily devoured myriad titles from the *Fear Street Saga* by R.L. Stein or anything written by popular novelist Christopher Pike. Then, as I grew older and ventured into high school, my reading preferences changed yet again. Being a novice, I ran with the authors I already knew (such as Pike) who had also written for adult audiences. Finding the pickings to be a little slim, I began to look through the adult horror section of the bookstore and happened upon authors such as Anne Rice, whose famous title *Interview with the Vampire* had just made it onto the big screen, and as such was an easy segue into the world of adult horror/fantasy literature. So I branched off and read as many of her novels as I could, continuing on to other writers such as Steven King and other authors who wrote about vampires, witches and the like. These were the novels that would keep me grounded during the bulk of my teenage years when my mother's depression and multiple suicide attempts were an affliction too great to bear for a girl of twelve to seventeen. It

was in reading that I was able to escape the reality in which I was forced to exist – the one in which I washed my father's clothing and prepared his dinner daily so that he may go to visit her after his long day at work. Finding my situation to be incomprehensible to my friends, and my sister being too young to be of much physical help, my mother's illness forced me to become an adult long before I was ready. While most of my peers were busy going out, sleeping in late, doing drugs and having sex, I folded clothing, walked the dog, prepared lunches for work and school, and read voraciously. I read because when I read I felt comfortable in my aloneness. When I read, I disconnected from the world for a time and reading was safe because no one could hurt me.

Years went by, and with much therapy and healing, my mother came out of her darkest time, rejoining the family once again. In the interim, I managed to find myself a boyfriend (whom I would later wed and have children with) and, for a time, all was calm. I began to read less and less as I concentrated on my studies and newly acquired social life. I reveled at being in love and made up for the time lost in my adolescence, reading less and less day by day. After a time, I realized I missed reading but felt I'd lost the taste I once had for the horror novels I had heretofore read. By this time I was in my early twenties and, after hearing me lament during the course of a conversation on current literature, a friend of a friend suggested I try reading a fantasy novel, as he fluidly handed over a giant volume written by some author who I had never seen on the New York Times Bestsellers list (but would see often from that point forward). Fantasy, huh? I had often heard of fantasy literature only I had never truly given the genre a chance because (quite immaturely) I thought it was something only nerds and geeks were into – and I, above all, was not a nerd. It would have been useless for someone to tell me that fantasy for adults had been around for thousands of years as its own proper genre of literature or that

many authors had made great and lasting careers writing in the genre, many of whom were women. I wouldn't have noticed and it wouldn't have mattered. All I knew for sure was that people who played Dungeons & Dragons, were loners, physically awkward, socially backward or were your stereotypical geek, read fantasy books. And that was not for me. After all, I'd spend much, if not all, of my adolescence trying to separate myself from the label of being "uncool" when all I wanted, even as I struggled through my personal issues, was desperately to fit in. Still, and probably more out of politeness than anything else, I reluctantly accepted the offering and headed straight home to give this new genre a try.

And boy am I glad I did.

I must digress here for a moment however to say that the novels I ran through as I made my way, having jumped feet first into the genre, were not stellar by any means. As with anything in life, it takes a while to sort out the quality from the rubbish and a lot of what sets quality literature apart from rubbish is a matter of personal opinion and the individual personality of the reader. So I stuck with the genre and read through a great many average novels before finally setting acceptable limits for myself regarding what, at least for me, represented a fantasy novel of any merit. The characters had to be three-dimensional, the themes adult and sophisticated in nature. The series needed to be going somewhere, plot-wise and character-wise, to keep me entertained – no one-dimensional characters for me! I was searching for intrigue. Passion. Loss. Love. I wanted a riveting read. One which could attain a range of emotion so great that putting the novel down would be a crime. I read through a plethora of less than ideal novels before one rainy, but lucky day, I happened upon a title by fantasy author Robin Hobb who would forever change the way I read fantasy novels from that point on. Hobb's characters were everything one could hope for in a novel or fantasy series. Her characters were flawed,

sympathetic, fallible, erratic, determined, carnal and cruel. Neither black nor white, they floated in grey areas where I found it hard to tell if I should vote for the protagonist to succeed when I sometimes wished that they would fail or for the villain to triumph because – my goodness! – he has a real point. And the characters were not all there was to it. Indeed I realized, in reading Hobb's tales, that there is a lot more to them than originally meets the eye. In fact, aside from knowing that I was reading a fantasy novel, the situations and challenges which some of the characters faced within the novels related to me both as a reader and as an individual searching for catharsis. Furthermore, Hobb's novels provided interesting subject matter thematically which helped to put my life and problems into perspective. Topics such as slavery, class politics, gender inequality, racism, wealth, poverty, love and romance, family, duty, vengeance, and connection to religion and religious belief, are all discussed or reflected upon in Hobb's *Liveship Traders* trilogy.

As a reader taking a glimpse into what characters living through these trying situations were doing in order to cope, I was able to step back a little from my own worries and realize that no matter what situation I was living through, things could always potentially be worse. I also grew to appreciate the precious attention paid to detail and the lengthy descriptive paragraphs offered in Hobb's tales, which mesmerized me so greatly. As a copywriter and creative writer with her undergraduate degree in English Literature, the writing itself induced feelings of jealousy and inadequacy since every time I attempted to write a novel of my own, the sheer grandeur of it stopped me dead in my tracks – and so of course, as I read the work of an author I so longed to resemble, I was keenly aware of a war within me between my dreams and ideals of a life as a published writer and the reality of being unable to get the words onto the page. Hobb's voice, which both intoxicates and spoils the reader, captivated me so greatly that I was

completely enthralled. Furthermore, the above-mentioned themes being played out and discussed are set in a fantastic world full of mystery and magic, and hence, are not as frightening to deliberate and reflect upon somehow. I found, as I read through the novels, that the aforementioned topics, which, I tend to avoid debating – on account of the fact that they can be highly sensitive to certain audiences – became easier not only to understand but also to discuss more openly. I believe this was a result of having read about them in a recreational context as opposed to an academic one. True I may have been able to read about topics of this nature in any fictional novel or academic text (and certainly all those themes – and more – are present in a great many of the world's most popular tales), but there is something about the fantasy genre which lends to the suspension of one's own mechanism of disbelief. In my view, this suspension of disbelief makes the reader more receptive to absorbing lessons inherent in the tale (whether consciously or unconsciously) and to discussing or reflecting upon topics in which they might otherwise not be ready to engage.

It was as I put down the trilogy, and came thereafter, to the hard realization that there was no more story to be told, that, for the first time in my life, I was angry that a book (in this case, a series) was over. I find myself annoyed even now as I write, even though I have read the series many times since then and Hobb herself has put out another four books which spin off from the series in question. Still, I feel that my attachment to the books and their characters has changed me. And so now, I would like to discuss the books with you more openly as I reflect upon some key story elements and characters which have stood out to me and helped me to learn and to grow over the years. I will go back to some of the theories discussed in the literature review portion of this essay and draw examples from the texts which help to support the theories we have come across. I will then, in one form or another, relate the material and academic theory to

my own reflections about the novels and how they affected me. I hope that by the end of this next section, you will see how useful literature can be to an individual on a quest for a better understanding of the world in which they are living.

What I Learned from the Novels

As you may remember from before, a common reason that people are drawn to fantasy literature (as with literature in general) is because it can be an easy way to escape the goings on in their everyday lives. My attraction to the genre has been no different. What I love the most about it is that in fantasy literature we can come to know creatures we would never meet in our ordinary world. We can watch people we can never become, interact with settings and characters so absurd and intriguing that our normal world pales in comparison, our mortal abilities dwarfed in their supernatural ones. The world of fantasy is often said to be magical, mystical, frightening and exciting. And none of this alternate reality would be possible if not for the vivid and healthy imaginations of the gifted authors and artists who dream it all up for us to share and enjoy.

Imagination is a key element both for fantasy fiction and transformational learning and is a term which can have many meanings and variations. In an academic context, Egan (2003) posits that imagination is fundamental to the learning process and argues that imagination can propel us forward in our quest for learning. I have found in my research that this has been true for me too. If I am faced with a problem of some sort, the fastest way to solve it is to imagine up a solution and then see if, practically, that solution is feasible. But one must necessarily plan out how to go about solving the problem and that is only possible in the realm of imagination and thought. Creatively, the simple exposure to fantasy literature as a newly discovered genre (at least for me) awakened a sense of whimsy in me and renewed in me a sense of abandon which I

had thought long gone. It made possible what otherwise seemed impossible, if in idea only. This realization, I recognized, was something I found I had in common with many of the characters in the *The Liveship Traders* series. Althea Vestrit (primary viewpoint character) loses her liveship to her hateful brother-in-law in the wake of her father's death. Even though the situation seems hopeless, Althea continues to dream up ways to get her birthright back. Kennit, the "villain", dreams of becoming King of the Pirate Isles. He envisions the type of society he wants to rule and seems to always be one step ahead of everyone else around him, moving swiftly forward towards a goal which has not been realized yet but which, to him, is more than tangible. Wintrow seeks to find a way to become a priest and impart his knowledge and wisdom to those less fortunate by teaching others and guiding them towards a greater purpose. Despite his being imprisoned on his family's ship, and by his own father, no less, the prospect of freedom and communion with Sa is what gives him the courage to press on in the face of uncertainty. These are but three of the main viewpoint characters in the novels who rely on their imaginations to move them forward with their lives. If they did not imagine up solutions to their problems or to goals that they must reach, they would not have the motivation they require in order to propel their stories forward.

We, as human beings, are no different. I myself can easily relate to Althea, Kennit and Wintrow (who are but some of the characters we meet in the tale) because I too have had to count on what I can imagine as a sole motivator for getting through some tough situations in my life. For example, as I mentioned before, during my high school years, my mother was very ill. It was a very difficult and trying experience for me to be the dutiful daughter and take care of my younger sister and father more than I felt I should have had to, and certainly as compared to what I knew of other girls my age. I wasn't living the same lives as they. I wasn't being invited to

parties or out to clubs. I didn't have a boyfriend, wasn't having sex or doing drugs. I wasn't part of any particular clique or band. Many of the girls I knew had great relationships with their mothers – as did I, quite often, with mine – but that was really only possible when my mother was at home and wasn't in a depressive state. And so I had to rely on my imagination. Both to help me find solutions to my problems and also to sometimes imagine myself somewhere else. A familiar dream was one in which I was someplace happy with a mother who was present and normal – one whom I could count on to be there all the time – taking care of me and not the other way around. Imagination was the only plan of action I had and what was best about it (aside from it being endless in scope and ability) was that it was quite nearly the only thing I could control and truly manipulate when faced with a difficult time. I could imagine myself away from where I was, what I was doing, who I was with or even who I was entirely. And as I saw the characters in the novels imagine up solutions to their problems, I began to mimic their behavior in my own everyday life.

And so, in this example, fantasy novels and the recognition of the teaching ability of the realm of imagination helped me in more ways than one. First, I was able to escape my everyday reality in reading the novels – novels made extra attractive to me by the impossibility of them, considering the limits of our physical world – and then I was able to see that the characters in the novels dealt with their dilemmas in much the same ways as I did my own – through the use of their imaginations and by keeping their eyes on the ethereal prize. Of course, this was not something I realized consciously as I was in the process of reading the novels. I was much too young then. I only realized this long after, as I began to question why the genre stuck out for me so much and why I was so drawn to it. Why the genre? Why these particular novels? What about them made them so attractive?

I realize now it was because I wanted to be where those characters are, in their world, living their lives, eating the food they eat, touching the things they touch, experiencing the magic which is impossible for us, but is common for them. Imagination is the closest thing I have to getting there. And so imagination is an important element of self-discovery, as Egan (2003) points out, as it leads to self-reflection and in self-reflection, we ask questions about ourselves. Answering those questions leads to knowledge. And knowledge, to learning. And we already know that learning can be transformational in nature. This is as true of the characters in the novels as it is of myself. As we have seen, transformational learning happens when the acquisition of new knowledge takes you from the state of knowledge which already exists within you and, through the introduction of new ideas and perspectives, beckons you towards a form of new understanding about yourself and about the world. Imagination is a vehicle through which these types of changes can happen and through which they often do.

Here is another imagination-based example which rings true for me but takes a slightly different turn. At the novel's commencement, Malta is a spoiled little rich girl who cares nothing for her family or heritage and only for herself, pretty things and men's attention. Reyn is able to provide what she covets most as he courts her with precious and expensive gifts from the strange and enigmatic region of the Rain Wilds. He treats her like the queen she imagines herself to be but disappoints her greatly as he refuses to show his face. Still, Malta imagines him ridiculously handsome under his veil of mystery. In fact, she imagines Reyn so great a lover that she cannot contain her disappointment when the veil is eventually lifted, and a horribly ugly man is revealed, after she has already fallen in love with him. It is a cautionary tale of what may happen when one lets one's imagination get the better of them. One can imagine up situations that are helpful, motivational and useful – such as an escape plan – or one can imagine such things of

fancy that a hard truth, revealed over time, can be a huge blow to the ego. I love this example so much because it is a true illustration of how one can imagine situations to be something completely other than what they are. I cannot possibly count the number of times in my life that I have been humbled by the folly of my own imagination. And some of that imagining has led to moments of embarrassment and regret. I recall a situation in which I imagined a high school crush to be someone wonderful and interesting and I carried a torch for him well into my adult years. As life would have it, our paths would cross again and afford me the scintillating opportunity to have a brief extramarital affair. I am not entirely sure what I hoped to gain from that situation. Perhaps it was a sense of self-worth or revenge or the feeling that somehow I had a score to settle against my younger, more "losery" self, but whatever the motivation was, I knew this was a man I wanted and a circumstance which I would do anything possible to make happen for myself. Once all was said and done however, I realized he was nothing like the man I had built him up to be in my head. I could not believe how blind I had been all those years ago and felt the ultimate fool to have carried those lovesick emotions from such a young age so far into the future. It was a truly transformational experience for me as I realized that my imagination had played tricks on me of the cruelest kind – it had let me believe that I was someone this man wanted and that he was someone I wanted in return. But the truth is that neither one of us wanted the other and in that discovery, I was able to finally put my doubts about myself to rest.

I came out of that experience with a drastic change of perspective and a rare sense of purification. Cranton (2006) says that transformational learning offers a shift in perspective but I feel that that experience was more of a leap than a mere sidestep, and was no doubt transformational in nature. Lange (2013) says that these changes in perspective necessarily evoke confrontation with one's own existing reality and that has also been my truth. Questioning one's

existing reality can be a purifying experience because it causes a drastic shift in the meaning of what we think we know. Thus that questioning has the potential to alter not only our view with regard to ourselves but potentially, and on a much grander scale, our entire world view. This is also a phenomena present in the novels and is most apparent when Malta is kidnapped by Chalcedean shipmen and unwittingly set out on her own adventure in which she must grow up quickly under harsh and deplorable conditions. Soon enough, she is delivered a hefty dose of her own medicine, and this changes her attitude some. She is then left to her own devices to find her way out of her dire straits and so she must be creative by drawing upon what she already knows and merging it with what she has learned if she is ever to find her way home again. So no matter how it is presented, we can see that for characters real or virtual, imagination is a key component in the process of self-discovery and can be a powerful motivator for self-propulsion with the added benefit of facilitating knowledge. And what a discovery that is!

Mezirow (1997) asserts that transformational learning is lifelong, and lifewide but warns that so long as we stay in our comfort zones, we are unable to change the ways in which we perceive things and thus, may stunt our own growth. Therefore, if we do aim to make transformative changes in the ways in which we learn and grow, we must, according to Mezirow (1997), step outside of our comfort zones and continue to experience new things. In doing so, he posits, we may requalify ourselves as responsible and autonomous thinkers.

Freire (1976) argues that frames of reference are moulded by any given society. This is easily evidenced in fantasy novels by the differences in points of view. Trader families who are well-to-do do not experience things the same way as those who are struggling. The Taneira family owes no debt on Ophelia and can afford all the luxuries that a paid off Liveship allows.

The people of the Rain Wilds respect the old ways and are hesitant to take on the new. They worry about preserving their society and know that they must mingle their blood in order to do so or their degenerative condition will continue to improve. Perspectives are influenced by how we live. Malta is a prime example. She goes from being the spoiled little rich girl to a humbled queen. All that is stripped of her are her riches. And boom! She is a shell of her former self. Forever changed by the experiences she has lived. Althea continues to rebel against what is known. And in doing so, elicits change. Even as Malta escapes in her little wooden boat, she exhibits Freire's theory. One must have a basic form of education in order for said education to develop. Spencer (2006) too, is reflected herein. How else could Wintrow, through a drastic change in perspective, have gone from being a priest in training to being captain of his own pirate ship? In living with the pirates, and taking care of both Kennit and Etta, Wintrow came to a new understanding of who and what the pirates are. He hated being aboard Vivacia, but came to know and love the ship and her crew. His time aboard Vivacia changed him not only from a boy into a man but from a man into a king. He would never know what fate his father fared. But with this new self-understanding, by the end of the tale, it didn't matter anymore. His perspective had been completely altered as a result of his time aboard the ship and his exposure to the pirate king, Kennit. I think this is the perfect example of what it is like to get to know other people and other cultures – things which we must all come across at one point or another. Now, I am someone who considers herself to be quite empathetic in nature. It is easier for me, as compared to other people that I know, to put myself in the other person's shoes and try to understand the world from their point of view than it is for most people I have met. And having the experience that I have with exchange students who come to live with me for a year at a time, I know how the integration of oneself into another culture can open up your mind and heart to lessons and

experiences which will forever leave you altered. I cannot tell you how many times I have coached my students on what it will be like when they return home from their year abroad. They are saddened when they hear that they will change even as their friends at home, who have not gone on exchange, will change as well and that when they go back home to their countries of origin, their friends of old will no longer seem familiar. And this is a sobering thing. But in order for a change of that magnitude to happen, they must first come to Canada with what education they have brought from their home countries. They must then live the Canadian experience, influenced greatly by the host families they are placed in and the school which they attend. And then these kids must face themselves as they head back home after a "short" year abroad and realize that the change has happened so subtly that it went unnoticed for a time. Their new Canadian education influencing what they knew. And I am there to coach them through all of it, and live through it with them, year after year, drying confused tears off the faces of souls so much braver than my own. And I can do this, because I understand what they are going through. Not because I have ever spent a year abroad, but because of my exposure to literature, which helps me to imagine what being immersed in another culture must feel like. And so far, so good.

There are, of course, other lessons which I have learned through the novels and which have taught me more about myself than simply how to relate to other people. For example, I have had many occasions as I read through the series to confirm to myself that morals and values are still alive and well in today's self-indulgent and egotistical society. I sometimes wonder if it really pays to be honest, generous and giving. Because in today's world, the only people I see profiting and reaping rewards are people who will stop at nothing to make a buck and who are often stingy, unsympathetic and even outright cruel. There seems to me to be a loss of integrity.

People are not trusted or taken at their word and as someone who is perhaps too romantic or traditional, it pains me when a promise is broken so flippantly that a person's own name or promise of repayment isn't worth a dime. Of course this is not an absolute. I still manage to get away with paying my dentist off rather slowly – and it does get done – only I am keenly aware that there is a lack of trust in this world we live in and I'm one of the few people I know who are struggling to revive honor amongst friends. And I struggle with the realization that I long for a time that has long passed us by and which I will likely never see again.

The Liveship Traders series offers a comparable example. The Vestrit family is struggling to pay off *The Vivacia,* something which they have been preoccupied with for a while. Many, if not all, of the life decisions they make are based around their family's honor and the repayment of debts that are owed on the ship. They keep on asking for more time based on their family's reputation and honor. Still, sooner or later, the extension is refused and no amount of good intentions can save them from their fate. Perhaps it is foolish of me to think that good intentions can save the world. I suppose if this were so, we'd be all done with suffering by now. But my honor means a lot to me. I was raised with a sense of integrity and honesty and these things are values that I have always held dear. Still, I cannot help but feel inadequate whenever I am near someone who makes more money than I do, who has a bigger house, or can afford to take vacations. I get jealous when a person that I know can afford to spend money flippantly. I want to be able to do that too. And so I understand Ronica's preoccupation with paying off *The Vivacia* as quickly as possible and clearing the family name of the shame of unbearable debt. Shame is a terrible thing. One which I know too well. Ronica means to keep her family's honor intact. If she has to go without, she'll go without, but find the money to pay, she will, if it's the last thing she does. That kind of motivation, I realize even as I chuckle at the thought, only

happens in novels and watching Ronica struggle to make ends meet is simply inspirational. She is the family matriarch. And she'll take care of her own. And many times, I have felt, she is the woman I hope to be. Sticking to her guns no matter what. Picking up all the broken pieces even when the glass has shattered into such fine shards that they are hardly noticeable. Ronica notices them. And she prefers her rooms tidy.

Ronica's influence has been particularly rousing for me in light of my recent separation. When I left my husband late last year, I was saddled with all of our joint debts. We lost our home and all the money we had invested into it and I was stuck paying insurance for the contents of a home in which I no longer lived. Without getting into the messiness of the decline of my relationship, I will point out that owing money is something that affects me greatly and on a very deep level. It makes me feel like a colossal failure that I couldn't stop this tragedy from happening. Alone I did not earn enough to be able to save my house, and so, like Ronica, I was a single woman, trying to take on a mountain of debt, chipping away at it in any way I could imagine but clearly to no avail. And sadly it would turn out that all my efforts went to waste. Though I realized I must succumb to the torrential downpour of monies owed to creditors and paper pushers I had never met, I did come away from it having learned a thing or two else, namely, that life goes on, even if you can't control it. You see, Ronica's determination in the novel was inspirational enough for me to relate to. I likely would have pressed on anyway and tried to clear up what debts were under my name based simply on the way I was raised and what values were taught to me growing up. However, in this case, as I reflect back on it, the struggle to pay off the debt and my failure to accomplish this is easier to bear somehow. I believe this is because, if only being able to relate to the character herself, at least I don't feel so alone. I may not have succeeded in paying off my debts but I know now that where there's a will there's a

way and even if that way is unclear, and even if it's not what I have in mind, the way will be shown to me somehow or a new life path will be revealed. And so I learned (and am still learning) to relinquish control. Ronica does what she needs to do, as must I. But the simple prospect of seeing a character that I have come to know and love go through a similar experience to one I myself have lived through, successful or not, it is encouragement enough for me to try and face my own daemons and simply to let go.

I do not think these are lessons I would have learned so succinctly if not for my love of fantasy literature and my exposure to Hobb's books. No doubt I would have learned them in time, but to accept them so easily, is another matter entirely. I don't have to face my own ego, I realize, if I am busy learning lessons which have been filtered through other people, or in this case, characters in one of my favorite novels. I can simply absorb the lessons the characters learn and in doing so, challenge my own misconceptions about life.

You may remember that Maxine Greene (1986) argues for the use of literature in the classroom because she feels it helps students to confront their own preconceived illusions and stereotypes and this is highly subjective and based upon already existing knowledge. As such, as the reader gets into the novel, he or she may find themselves siding more with one character than another, depending on whom they can relate to. Can the actions of a slave trader be justified? What if he needs the money? In the series, Davad Restart does just that. He's suffering, emotionally and financially, just like many of the characters we meet. And so, Davad needs quick, easy cash. But the Vestrit's won't sink to that level. They have too much integrity. Ergo, the reader questions themselves. What would I do were I in Davad's position? Would I take the quick cash like he does, trading in slaves and suffering the wrath of the people who know and love him? Or would I take a different route, working and toiling honestly away, losing money,

owing on old debts, and sticking to a sense of pride, making sure my family name still held value and honor? Asking and answering these types of questions can be eye-opening as one attempts to examine the situation from both sides. Hobb does a wonderful job of this, as an author. As I mentioned, her characters are sympathetic and relatable. One tends to be able to see both sides. This is the type of deep thought that Greene (1986) talks about – the deep introspection that can only come when a person is able to conceive of how it might be to be and live like another person. Literature makes this type of reflection possible to a wide variety of people, including myself. And even though I do feel that I am possessed of a great empathetic nature, I feel that as a result of my exposure to the subconscious lessons I learned through reading fantasy fiction, I have become somewhat noticeably less judgemental; and this is a truth, that up until now, I have been reluctant to admit to anyone other than myself.

I agree with Dashiell's (1995) idea that women who read fantasy novels relate to the novels, not because of a real shared experience, but because the experience is indeed, similar in nature to the one the character is living. Though I have never, myself, dressed as a boy and killed sea creatures on a ship to make enough money to get my birthright back, I can relate to Althea who does just that because she puts herself through terrible conditions which only someone desperate enough to get what they want would succumb to willingly. There have been many times throughout my life when I have had to do things that I didn't want to do or things that would perhaps invite harsh judgement from the people around me, simply because I had my heart set on achieving one goal or another. In the case of my separation, I am hesitant to get divorced because I know that I will lose all flexibility where the best interests of the children we share are being served since a custody arrangement would instill a rigid schedule that my spiteful ex would adhere to vehemently. However, if I let him get away with his childish and controlling

behavior, as I have, these past few months, I, through endless pardoning and flexibility, am able to see my children more than he would otherwise permit. Most people have told me that my acceptance is ridiculous but it is easy to judge someone when you are not in their shoes. So, like Althea, who goes through physically and mentally trying times in order to win Vivacia back, I too have gone through (and still am going through) physically and mentally trying times and putting up with harsh emotional conditions because I know that in the end, the time I spend with my children now still has a chance at being somewhat spontaneous. And that is something they will remember always – which is a mother's greatest wish. Do I relish losing time with them in the interim? Of course not. However, I have come to realize that as a mother, I come last and they come first. I still struggle with it but have found in the long run that it is better to see them less and not fight with their father, instead welcoming them when their father is of a mind no matter what my schedule is, than it is to stick to a rigid schedule in which they will always remember difficulty. Dashiell (1995) points out rightly that we women do not share the exact experiences of the women (or other characters) in the fantasy novels that we read, we do respond to the similarity of the phenomena and that connection is a liberating and reassuring one. Moreover, it is through literature that we can think about topics which are, for all intents and purposes, intangible. I am not sure how I could teach a sense of integrity, decency or compassion to my children when actual moments to teach these things in life may not always become available. I must teach them these values when their minds are still like sponges, absorbing everything around them with a sense of wonder, exploration and trust. Dashiell (1995) reminds us that "modern fantasy offers a bevy of young women who are willing to defy societal conventions and follow the life work they have chosen" (p.46). I feel that my choice to put up with my ex-husband's erratic behavior towards me in order to preserve the best overall state of

love and peace for my children does just that – defy the norms of society and put me in a place where I am greatly stigmatized. Still, I must do what I must do and having heroines like Althea Vestrit in *The Liveship Traders* series who continuously defy societal norms gives me hope that when my children get older, they will come to understand the reasons that I chose to do as I did.

Now that I try to think back on it, I realize it is hard to point out exactly just at which point the realization came that I have always enjoyed fantasy stories in one form or another. Whether in book form, or on television or in movies, whether disguised as fiction, romance, horror or erotica, fantasy tales were my go-to for relaxing and informative entertainment. It was only when I began to realize how much fantasy literature had affected my own life that I began to see its use as a teaching tool for learning that takes place inside the classroom. Furthermore, having come to the realization that fantasy literature could be a gateway through which a person could better come to know his or herself, I wondered how fantasy literature has helped me, as a woman, to learn and grow, react to and interact with both myself and the outside world. What life lessons have I learned through my interaction with fantasy literature and why that particular genre? I wondered how exposure to the strong female characters in the fantasy literature that I have read transformed my own learning experience over the last 20 years of my life? And what could this mean for other women if other women were exposed to the genre or the same novels?

I would have liked to have been able to learn these truths about myself in the classroom, where I feel I may have had a more structured and less judgemental environment. But I don't know that it would have been possible. I feel somehow that when we are in an academic setting, there is a stress involved because we often feel the need to perform. People are competitive. We want to be better than the person sitting to our left or to our right and when I read, I do that for myself and not for some sort of academic recognition. Still, I am happy to have the lessons that I

have learned through the books I've read stick with me. I have been fortunate enough, through my relationship with fantasy literature, to learn about other cultures, social issues, gender discourse, and politics as well as to have a way in which to escape my ordinary world, for a time, without resorting to substance abuse or other forms of degradation. Through fantasy literature, I have learned to stand up for myself, to believe in the impossible, to defy and challenge what I am told is right or wrong and (Freire would be proud) to change my point of view based on newly acquired information, not sticking wholeheartedly to one dogma or another simply because it has been fed to me since birth. I can challenge not only the world now, but the preconceived notions I have about myself. And it is a constant struggle. I cannot tell you how many times I have caught myself in the midst of accepting fate only to realize, that just a slight change in perspective can make the world of difference, opening up a set of possibilities that would otherwise have remained hidden in the dark. I refuse any more to be a lamb led to the slaughter. And just because I know something now, does not mean I cannot combine my knowledge to something I will come to learn in time. I hope I continue to pay attention to the lessons that life has to teach me. I hope I never become satisfied that I know all there is to know. And, I know, that if I ever feel that I am bored, depressed or stagnant, I can return to my world of fantasy literature and feel myself, once again, come alive.

Conclusion

I have argued that fantasy fiction is a veritable tool for educators which has been underused in the classroom in favor of mainstream literature or classic educational theory texts. My own experience with the genre has proven to me that fantasy literature is ripe with learning opportunities which can reach even the most skeptical of readers and subconsciously impart onto them lessons and ideas which can open their minds to new experiences and points of view. This

will hopefully lead them to other and varying degrees of discourse which will inevitably become a part of who they are and change their life experience.

As a master's candidate, I cannot say whether or not this is true for everyone. I only know, through my collection of research and reflections, that this has been true for me. It has been true in the past, and continues to be as I continue to learn, grow, change and absorb new information, which begets the same cycle, over and over again. For me, fantasy literature has opened up a world in which I could question myself and the choices I have made throughout my life. It has given me a chance to escape painful and difficult moments. It has given me the opportunity to engage in meaningful conversation with others about topics I would otherwise feel too shy to discuss because I now can more closely relate to what other people might be going through and I am less judgemental as a result of having received that subconscious education.

No doubt mainstream literature can do the same for most people.

But as I responded better to fantasy literature, mostly because of its escapist, magical, and impossible nature, and could not seem to relate to mainstream fiction in the same fashion, I believe that should we expose students (especially adults, who, so often, are set in their ways) to fantasy literature in a classroom setting, we might stand a better chance of people adopting the genre and hence, learning from it, as did I. I believe this follows Freire's theories nicely as if we are exposed to the genre from the beginning, we can build off of that onto other experiences. We should then add those experiences to our repertoires and interact with them, questioning ourselves at every opportunity in a quest for a transformative and spiritual growth. As for further opportunities for exploration, I would like to see more university classes devoted to the study of fantasy literature and would even like to see classes overlap into other disciplines as fantasy

literature can be related to so many areas of study such as religion, philosophy, humanities, literature, teaching, education and the list goes on.

And what of fantasy literature for personal growth and evolution outside of the classroom? Well. I would say we have already been doing that quite successfully for centuries. When I set out to write this thesis on the educational uses of fantasy literature for transformational learning, I set out to discover how fantasy literature has influenced my own personal educational trajectory and has provided me with an unparalleled experience in transformational learning and wondered what would happen if we included more fantasy literature into higher education and supposed that its inclusion could be nothing other than beneficial. Then, through much reflection and exposure of raw truths, I realized, as I was writing that what was true for me – that I could learn and grow as a person as a result of my interaction and admiration for the genre – might very likely be true for others as well. This realization, this idea of the possibility that I was not alone, in turn gave me the courage to explore myself much more deeply than I may otherwise have been prepared. Now, and when faced with difficult life situations in which decisions or solutions are often forcefully suggested to me by others or the pressures of society at large, I tend to think twice before taking action. Not only do I ask myself if I am prepared to follow the herd blindly like a lamb to the slaughter, but I realize that no, I am not now, nor will ever be ready to accept the fate that others would bestow upon me – at least without exploring my other options first.

I have choices.

I have agency.

And so do all of you out there who are raised to believe that you do not.

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