Women’s Literature: Worlds of Fantasy and Science Fiction

Oak Meadow Coursebook
In this unit, we focus on the fantasy works of Diana Wynne Jones. You will read the following books:

- *Dogsbody* tells the story of a star who is sentenced to living life on Earth in the body of a dog while retaining some of his star memories and unique abilities. His quest to redeem himself is hampered—and in some ways, enhanced—by his mundane body and interactions with humans.

- *Fire and Hemlock* is a mysterious fantasy that centers around those who are caught up in a powerful world of magic that seems to be coming from their own imaginations. The veil between the magical and ordinary worlds is masterfully woven in this complex tale.

Both of these stories feature female heroes, a driving force behind Jones's work, as she explains in her essay “A Heroic Ideal—A Person Odyssey” (found at the end of *Fire and Hemlock*):

“But a desire was growing in me to have a real female hero, one with whom all girls could identify and through that, all persons—a sort of Everywoman, if you like . . . I knew that what I wanted to do really was to write a book in which modern life and heroic
5. Have you ever rescued an animal, a wild one or a pet? If not, do you know of anyone who has? Please write at least one or two paragraphs, using a first-person narrative to describe the events surrounding the animal being rescued. (You can write a fictional narrative if you don’t have any personal experience in this area. If you do, please note that it is a work of fiction.)

FOR ENROLLED STUDENTS
Please submit your work to your Oak Meadow teacher.
ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

- Read chapters 14–16 and the Introduction in *Dogsbody*.
- Write a two-page reflective essay on the importance of names.
- Complete reader’s journal assignments.

Learning Objectives

- Introduce an essay with a clear topic statement.
- Use literary and personal examples to support ideas.
- Write a relevant conclusion.

Along the Way

*Dogsbody*, as a title, provides an indication of what happens to Sirius; he is a celestial being born into the body of a dog—a dog’s body. But *dogsbody* also has another meaning in British usage as “a person who is given boring, menial tasks,” which describes Kathleen’s situation in the household where she lives. Like Sirius, she is in exile, and *Dogsbody* is her story, too.

Lesson 3 Assignments

Reading

This week, read chapters 14–16, plus the Introduction.

Reader’s Journal

Continue to work on your three reader’s journal assignments:

1. Keep track of the episodes where celestial beings appear to either help or hinder Sirius.
2. List instances where humans treat animals with either kindness or cruelty (or a mix of the two).

3. Write down and define new words you come across.

Writing

1. Write a two-page reflective essay on the importance of names in *Dogsbody*. The names given to the characters, and what the names signify, are an aspect of the way that Jones is building the world of this novel. How do the names affect you? What do you feel about the derogatory names Sirius and Kathleen are called in the story? Why are names important in establishing one’s identity? In your essay, reflect on your responses to the names as well as the name-calling in the book. Include text references to support your thoughts. (Use your reader’s journal notes.)

Introduce your essay with a clear statement of your impressions, and in subsequent paragraphs, develop your ideas as you offer examples and further reflections. Conclude with a statement about how names in the story play a role in the novel and also how Jones uses names as a way of creating this fictional world. Since this is a substantial two-page essay, you may want to begin with an outline or graphic organizer like an idea web to get your thoughts ordered.

After writing your rough draft, share it with your teacher, parent, or other adult for feedback.

**FOR ENROLLED STUDENTS**
Submit the rough draft of your essay to your teacher. You will receive feedback that you can use to revise and polish your essay. The final essay will be due at the end of lesson 4.
ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

☐ Incorporate feedback into a revised essay.

☐ Choose a creative project to complete:
  Option A: The Celestial Society
  Option B: Short Story Writing
  Option C: The World of Sirius
  Option D: The World of Colors

Learning Objectives

• Revise, edit, and proofread an essay.
• Explore story themes in a creative, original way.

Lesson Assignments

Writing

1. Finalize your essay from lesson 3, using the feedback you received from your teacher, parent, or other adult. After you review the feedback, revise your essay to expand ideas that need more explanation, eliminate redundancies or sentences that are off-topic, and improve the overall flow of the writing. Ask yourself:

• Is my information well-organized? Are the main ideas and supporting details in a logical sequence?
• Is there a beginning, middle, and an end to each paragraph and to the piece as a whole?
• Are my sentences phrased carefully? Do I vary the sentence structure?
• Have I stayed on topic? Have I omitted needless words and phrases?
When the essay is revised, it can help to read it aloud—this helps you identify weak spots. Edit it to strengthen word choices, adjust awkward phrasing, and add sentence variety. Once you have your final draft, proofread it to catch any lingering errors in spelling, punctuation, or grammar. When you submit your finalized essay, you should feel it is a strong example of your best writing.

2. Choose one of the options below—or come up with an original idea of your own—and create a project based on the book. You have one week to complete this project. Read each of the options below before making your choice (or coming up with your own idea), and then spend some time brainstorming out loud and on paper about what you’d like to do. Break down your project into stages and then create a schedule that will allow you to complete it within one week. Your project could be presented through a painting, a storyboard, a sculpture, an animation, a video, or a short story—let your imagination go wild!

(If you aren’t sure what to do, or would like help planning your project, contact your teacher.)

**Project Option A: The Celestial Society**

Reflect on the hierarchical world of the stars, planets, and moons in the story. What are the different qualities and abilities of each? How do they relate to one another in terms of power or control? First, outline how Jones imagined them, and then visually or with words (or another creative process) express your own imaginings about the relationships and natures of celestial beings.

**Project Option B: Short Story Writing**

Write a short story based on a consciousness being put into another body. You might write about a human being transformed into a star, or about a star being transformed into a human, or an animal becoming a human, or a human becoming an animal.

**Project Option C: The World of Sirius**

Create a visual representation of the world as seen through Sirius’s eyes. Try to include elements of both his dog perceptions and his star-self perceptions. Include a brief statement about your piece.

**Project Option D: The World of Colors**

Think about the role colors play in *Dogsbody*. How do colors have meaning in this story? Use colors to portray a scene from the story, or visually explore the role and meaning of colors in everyday life. Include a brief statement about your piece.

**FOR ENROLLED STUDENTS**

Submit your finalized two-page essay from lesson 3 to your Oak Meadow teacher, along with your completed creative project.
Among many other things, this novel is a mystery about creating stories, about discovering one's own story, and about the reality of the imagination. It is also about what Jones calls “a proper hero,” which, besides being the one you identify with in the story, must have the following attributes:

- Brave
- Physically strong
- Never mean or vicious
- Willing to come to the aid of those in need when no one else will
- Have some relationship to gods or supernatural beings (usually but not always)
- Knowingly go into action when the odds are against them

In her essay following the story, Jones comments that a common folktale element is that the highest ideal, and the thing worth striving for, is love. Jones’s story is, in her words, “a foray into the supernatural world of the imagination to rescue the one you love.”

Learning Objectives

- Analyze character traits and behavior.
- Support answers with textual evidence.
Reader’s Journal

Begin this new unit in your reader’s journal by noting the book’s title and author.

Here are your reader’s journal assignments for this book:

1. Keep track of the character names, roles, and relationships (some characters have more than one name and role).

2. Keep track of the place names and the travels taken by the Envoy. You may want to draw a map to help you keep track (this can also serve as the basis for an extra-credit project).

3. Jot down notes about the Gethenian myths that are interspersed through the story (you’ll find them in chapters 2, 4, 9, 12, and 17). Choose one each week and explain its meaning as it relates to the story. Why include it? Why did the author place it at that point in the story? Write down your thoughts about how the story-within-a-story technique affects your experience as a reader. Do these myths enhance the story? If so, how?

You will turn in your reader’s journal at the end of this unit.

Writing

When answering assignment questions, please respond with one or more well-crafted paragraphs, unless otherwise noted. Begin with a focused thesis statement, include relevant examples from the text (cite page numbers), and end with a clear conclusion based on your exploration of the question.

1. List three ways in which Gethen is like Earth and three ways in which it is different. (Your answer can be a simple list.)

2. In chapter 7, “A Question of Sex,” the first Investigator notes that relating as humans without sexuality/gender recognition “is an appalling experience.” What is Genly’s experience, both with how others relate to him (as a gender-fixed person) and how he relates to others (as gender fluid people)? Use relevant quotations from the story to support your answer.

3. How does the ambisexuality of the Gethens create a different kind of society than one that is strictly gendered? Give your own thoughts on this question (you don’t need to cite text references).

4. Reflect on how the gender-focused society we live in defines us, defines you. How often does it happen that each of us is seen primarily as male or female? Is the world of the 21st century changing with regard to the role gender plays in relationships and personal identity?

FOR ENROLLED STUDENTS

If you have any questions about the assignments or about the book itself, let your teacher know. You will send in your work at the end of the next lesson.
Ursula Le Guin is recognized as one of the more influential science fiction writers of her time or any time. Many sci-fi authors have been inspired by her work. In the introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula Le Guin notes, “In reading a novel, any novel, we have to know perfectly well that the whole thing is nonsense, and then while reading it, believe every word of it. Finally, when we’re done with it, we may find—if it’s a good novel—that we’re a bit different from what we were before we read it, that we have been changed a little, as if by having met a new face, crossed a street we never crossed before.”

This book has the potential to do just that.
Lesson 10

*The Left Hand of Darkness: Trust and Betrayal*

**Assignment Summary**
- Read chapters 8–14 in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.
- Complete reader’s journal assignments.
- Identify instances of simile and metaphor and explain their relevance.
- Creatively expand on a story element.

**Learning Objectives**
- Identify and interpret examples of simile and metaphor.
- Write a science fiction scene.

**Along the Way**
- Pay attention to the point of view—expect it to switch with each new chapter in this week’s reading. Who is telling the story in each chapter? Notice how this change of narrator changes the tone and purpose of what is being revealed.
- In chapter 8, Genly reflects on the difference in temperament between the people of Karhide and the people of Orgoreyn. See if you can notice these temperamental differences as the story unfolds.

**Assignments**

**Reading**
Read chapters 8–14 in *The Left Hand of Darkness*:
- Chapter 8. Another Way into Orgoreyn
- Chapter 9. Estraven the Traitor
- Chapter 10. Conversations in Mishnory
Chapter 11. Soliloquies in Mishnory
Chapter 12. On Time and Darkness
Chapter 13. Down on the Farm
Chapter 14. The Escape

Reader’s Journal
Continue to work on your three reader’s journal assignments:

1. Keep track of the character names, roles, and relationships.
2. Keep track of the place names and Genly’s travels.
3. Choose one Gethenian myth (found in chapters 9 and 12 this week) and explain its meaning as it relates to the story. Explain your thoughts about its purpose and relevance in the story.

Writing
1. In chapter 10, Genly describes his gift of farfetching as “the intuitive perception of a moral entirety, and thus tends to find expression not in rational symbols, but in metaphor.” (146) Notice how often Genly uses metaphor and simile to explain his experiences. For instance, he describes Estraven this way: “The man was like an electric shock—nothing to hold on to and you don’t know what hit you.” (131) Find at least two other instances of metaphor or simile and explain how each one works. Why is it an effective way to describe the experience?
2. In chapter 10, Genly realizes he has little evidence to convince the local population of his claims because of the an Ekumen rule: “The old Law of Cultural Embargo stood against the importation of analyzable, imitable artifacts at this stage . . .” (135) (Star Trek fans may recognize some parallels with the Prime Directive.) Why is the Law in place? Use your imagination to create a scenario where one artifact from an advanced alien culture is introduced into a society with profound results (either profoundly beneficial or profoundly catastrophic). You can write your scenario in story form, if you’d like.

FOR ENROLLED STUDENTS
Please submit lessons 9 and 10 to your teacher.
Lesson 11
The Left Hand of Darkness: The Gobin Ice

ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY
- Read chapters 15–20 in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.
- Complete reader’s journal assignments.
- Give your personal response to story themes.

Learning Objectives
- Formulate and clearly express your opinion.
- Reflect on story elements as they relate to your own life.

Along the Way
- As Genly moves between Karhide and Orgoreyn, his feelings about the two nations flip-flop. Why? When he leaves Karhide, he is happy to leave the unstable government, and he finds Orgoreyn to be very well run and orderly. But by the time he leaves Orgoreyn, he feels the place is dangerously restrictive. Returning to Karhide, he feels safe and secure. Notice when, how, and why Genly’s impressions of the nations change.
- Rather than serve a king or country, Genly and Estraven serve humankind. What effect would that have on humanity if we all did that?
- Metaphors are used throughout the story. Is the ice, perhaps, a metaphor for the division between the people, politics, and beliefs of Karhide and Orgoreyn? Is it maybe more than just a geological feature of this story setting? What other role or symbolism might the ice convey?
Lesson 11 Assignments

Reading

Read the final chapters in *The Left Hand of Darkness*:

- Chapter 15. To the Ice
- Chapter 16. Between Drumner and Dremegole
- Chapter 17. An Orgota Creation Myth
- Chapter 18. On the Ice
- Chapter 19. Homecoming
- Chapter 20. A Fool’s Errand

Reader’s Journal

Continue to work on your three reader’s journal assignments:

1. Keep track of the character names, roles, and relationships.
2. Keep track of the place names and Genly’s travels.
3. Explain the purpose and relevance of the Gethenian myth (found in chapter 17). Did you find it an effective enhancement of the story? Why or why not?

Writing

1. Choose one of the following assignments:

   a) In chapter 15, Estraven asks, “How does one hate a country, or love one? . . . What is the love of one’s country; is it hate of one’s uncountry? . . . Is it simply self-love?” (212) This theme is revisited by Genly in chapter 19: “And I wondered, not for the first time, what patriotism is, what the love of country truly consists of, how that yearning loyalty that had shaken my friend’s voice arises, and how so real a love can become, too often, so foolish and vile a bigotry. Where does it go wrong?” (279) What is patriotism? Respond to the issues that Genly raises in the form of a conversation between yourself and Genly in which you present your view of love of country (or your home planet) and he presents the view of an intergalactic citizen.

   b) In chapter 7, “A Question of Sex,” the first Investigator is appalled to not have gender-identity as an anchor for relating to others and Genly has a similar experience. By the end of the story, Genly has come to appreciate the equalizing force of androgyny. After Genly
sees his crewmates, he is shocked by their faces, voices, and demeanor that is so gender-specific: “But they all looked strange to me, men and women . . . Their voices sounded strange: too deep, too shrill. They were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species . . .” (296) When he sees a Karhider again, he is relieved to see a “human face,” neither man nor woman. If you had a choice of living in a gender-neutral world, or a world in which gender was a choice that was presented anew each month, would you? Why or why not?

2. Choose one of the following questions to answer:

a) In chapter 16, Estraven has questions about the nature of a woman: “Do they differ much from your sex in mind behavior? Are they like a different species?” (234) Genly has trouble answering. How would you answer the question “What is a woman?” or “What is a man?”

b) Do you agree or disagree with Genly’s statements about gender in chapter 16, when he says, “I suppose the most important thing, the heaviest single factor in one’s life, is whether one’s born male or female. In most societies it determines one’s expectations, activities, outlook, ethics, manners—almost everything. Vocabulary. Semiotic usages. Clothing. Even food . . . It’s extremely hard to separate the innate differences from the learned ones.” (234) Give your own opinion, based on your experiences in life so far.

3. Choose one of the following assignments to respond to:

a) In chapter 18, Genly muses on the nature of happiness: “Happiness had to do with reason, and only reason earns it. What I was given was the thing you can’t earn, and can’t keep, and often don’t even recognize at the time; I mean joy.” (242) What are your thoughts on the matter? Support or refute Genly’s statements about happiness and joy using specific examples from your own experience.

b) While on the Gobin Ice, Genly teaches Estraven mindspeech. Would you learn this skill if you could? What would be the potential benefits? What would be the drawbacks? Your response can be in essay or story form.

c) In chapter 16, Estraven quotes a poem “Light is the left hand of darkness and darkness the right hand of light” (233). Later, in chapter 19, Genly realizes they need the shadows in order to walk on the snow, and he remembers the quote about darkness and light being connected. Genly shows Estraven the yin yang symbol, saying, “Light, dark. Fear, courage. Cold, warmth. Female, male. It is yourself, Therem. Both and one. A shadow on snow.” (267) What is he saying about Estraven? Is this a compliment?

d) How would you describe shifgrethor? What role might it play in our lives in personal relationships? In international diplomacy? Give specific examples in your response.

FOR ENROLLED STUDENTS

You will submit your work at the end of the next lesson.
UNIT III: World Building

For the final unit, you will read a novella called *Binti* by Nnedi Okorafor. The story’s themes mirror those of the other books in this course: distrust or dislike of those who are different, and a sense of superiority of those who are in the majority. Think about why these themes may be common among female writers. Think about how this may reflect the minority role, in terms of power, that women have had throughout centuries.

To wrap up the course, you will have the chance to create your own world of fantasy or science fiction.
Lesson 15  
*Binti*: Leaving Home and Finding the Self

ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

- Read the novella *Binti*.
- Address the issue of discrimination in a literary analysis or creative way.

Learning Objectives

- Write a literary or creative essay exploring the topic of discrimination.
- Demonstrate skills in revision, editing, and proofreading.

Assignments

Reading

Read *Binti* by Nnedi Okorafor. The book is 90 pages long, so you will be able to complete it in a week.

Writing

1. This book explores racial discrimination from different perspectives. Binti experiences it as someone whose minority race is routinely denigrated on her home planet. She also experiences it from the other side, as she struggles to understand and accept beings who are very different than she is. When Binti is transformed by her contact with the Meduse, she faces the challenge of seeing herself as both self and other.

What do you think about how the story addresses the issue of discrimination? Does the dual perspective the author uses—having Binti experience both sides of discrimination—present an effective way to explore the topic?

Either explore this topic in essay form or in a creative way by imagining yourself meeting an alien race for the first time, one with whom you have trouble relating to, not only in terms of communication but in terms of appearance, abilities, lifestyle, etc.
Write at least one page. Take your time to express your thoughts clearly and with your best writing. This means following the writing process. First, write a rough draft. Revise your rough draft to improve the overall content and flow of ideas. Edit the revised draft to increase its clarity and effectiveness. Have you used careful word choices? Is there any awkward phrasing? Is there a variety of sentence types and lengths? Finally, proofread the polished version to catch any lingering errors.

FOR ENROLLED STUDENTS
Please share your work with your Oak Meadow teacher.