

Summary of Star Wars and The Lord of the Rings Ideas for the Classroom

Main Themes for Classroom Discussion

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Religion often is a difficult topic to discuss within a world history/culture course. The traditions and beliefs of faiths can often be complex and lead to many questions and misunderstandings. One method that can overcome these misunderstandings is the employment of modern films to provide visual examples for religious ideas. Specifically, the *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings* film franchises provide multiple examples of religious themes and ideas. George Lucas' *Star Wars* franchise displays multiple examples of eastern philosophies and Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* film series, based on the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, provide numerous examples of the Christian ideas themes. By using *Stars Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings* in the classroom, students are provided samples of religious ideas and concepts in practice while witnessing the religion's connection to the modern world.

Buddhism

Star Wars can be used to reflect Buddhism through both character representations and religious ideas. One of the first connections that students identify between Buddhism and *Star Wars* is the character of Yoda as the visual representation of Buddha in a "galaxy far, far away." Additionally, scenes focusing upon Luke Skywalker's training with both Obi-Wan and Yoda display multiple aspects of Buddhism foundations.

Many of Luke's training scenes provide insight into the Buddhist concepts of the Eight-Fold Path and Four-Noble Truths. Yoda/Buddha is the representation of an individual who has journeyed far along the Eight-Fold Path. Also, Yoda can be

viewed as the living embodiment of the lotus flower. The lotus flower is a plant that grows in environments, such as swamps, not known for producing beauty.

Therefore, Yoda represents this beauty in the form of his knowledge and assistance in a swampy and dangerous location.

As opposed to Yoda, Luke is an individual who has just begun the journey on the Eight-Fold-Path. Luke's meeting with Obi-Wan, his training with Yoda, and the handling of his parental situation, reflect his advancement along the path to be a Jedi. Thus, Luke represents the journey along the Eight-Fold Path except his journey is the Jedi journey to enlightenment and not the Buddhist version.

It is Obi-Wan Kenobi who initially provides the visual version of the ultimate goal of a Buddhist. Obi-Wan is the *Star Wars*'s initial representative of the idea of nirvana, or someone who has reached eternal enlightenment and completed his/her journey on the Eight-Fold Path. This is visually accomplished when Kenobi becomes a Force-Ghost, or one with the Force. Kenobi foreshadows this journey when he states to Darth Vader "*if you strike me down, I will become more powerful than you can ever imagine*" (*Star Wars: A New Hope*). Kenobi realizes that he is becoming fully enlightened and will be reincarnated as an entity of light and knowledge.

Confucianism

Confucianism is strongly represented within the *Star Wars* films in terms of presenting the philosophy's major theme. This theme is the concept of social "harmony" leading to success and balance in life. Confucius stated that good

relationships, or harmony, with parents, family, and teachers would provide an individual with greater success in life. Therefore, if more people have harmonious lives, society as a whole would flourish. Within the framework of *Star Wars*, the galaxy is not safe until Luke and his father, Darth Vader, form a harmonious relationship. Also, Luke's discovery of an unknown sister, Princess Leia, reflects the strengthening of a family bond and helps create more harmony within the *Star Wars* galaxy. Finally, the teacher-student relationship is shown in Luke's interactions with both Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi. Luke does not flourish as a Jedi until he formulates solid and respectful relationships with his educators, Kenobi and Yoda.

Taoism

Taoism centers on the concept of the Tao or "the way." Within the *Star Wars* universe this philosophy is shown in the religion of the "Force." Both the Tao and the Force are nature based and Yoda makes a clear connection between the two by stating:

"For my ally is the Force, and a powerful ally it is. Life creates it, makes it grow. Its energy surrounds us and binds us. Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter. You must feel the Force around you; here, between you, me, the tree, the rock, everywhere, yes. Even between the land and the ship" (Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back).

Yoda is stating here that, much like the Tao, the Force is a present that surrounds all aspects of life. Both the Force and the Tao are more powerful within a nature

setting.

Taoism is shown within the *Star Wars* films by Yoda's constant stressing of balance in nature and life. Taoism reflects the idea of balance with its theory of Yin and Yang. Within the *Star Wars* films, the Force is centered on this idea of balance in terms of a dark and light side to the Force with Luke representing the light-side and Dark Vader the dark-side. Additionally, the overriding theme of the *Star Wars* series is Luke's goal of bringing balance to the galaxy. In order to accomplish this ultimate goal of balance with the Force, Luke has to return to a surrounding of nature, which in the films is Yoda's home planet, to understand the philosophy of the force. Thus, again, *Star Wars* is displaying the Taoist idea of nature as the teacher.

Christianity

Where *Star Wars* provides numerous examples of the so-called eastern religions and philosophies, *The Lord of the Rings* film series based on J.R.R. Tolkien's books reflect numerous Christian aspects. Tolkien himself was a devout Catholic and though claimed to not have written *The Lord of the Rings* as an allegory of any type, it is difficult not to see the influence of Christianity within the context of the material. Christianity can be a controversial topic in many classrooms, but using *The Lord of the Rings* as a basis, allows for focusing on the basic principles and teachings of the Christian faith.

To understand the Christian religion, one must understand the central figure of the Christian faith, Jesus Christ. This goal can be accomplished by focusing on the

character triumvirate of Gandalf, Frodo, and Aragon. These three represent the various roles of Jesus Christ and the basis of the Christian faith.

The wizard Gandalf represents Christ because he is the so-called “prophet character” of the story. Meaning Gandalf is the communicator between the heavenly and human worlds. Of course, in Middle Earth, Gandalf is the link between the heavenly and the world of humans, elves, dwarves, and orcs. Additionally, Gandalf represents Christ's resurrection from death. As Gandalf the White, Gandalf returns with a “message” for the remaining *Fellowship of the Ring*. The message is that the “king” will return to Middle Earth to rule from the heavenly throne of the city of Gondor. The wizard further represents Christ in that it is he who battles the Balrog in the Hell-like depths of Moria. It is in Moria that Gandalf makes the ultimate and Christ-like sacrifice of dying to save the other members of the Fellowship.

Gandalf also represent other aspects of the Christian faith in that he is the de-facto leader of the armies battling the forces of evil, thus, like the Pope, Gandalf is a spiritual, not landed, leader. Also, the so-called “Grey Pilgrim,” goes by many names as Christ does.

Another Christ-like figure in the movie is Aragon. Aragon is literally the “King” of the films. The third book/film of *The Lord of the Rings* series is entitled “*The Return of the King*.” Like Jesus, Aragon was called for by prophets and is often troubled by his role as the so-called “chosen one.” Additionally, similar to Christ, Aragon is a healer. This skill is reflected after the epic battle of Gondor. Finally, from a classroom and visual standpoint, at least within the films, Aragon’s appearance has the look of the traditional western Jesus.

The third Christ figure in *The Lord of the Rings* series is Frodo. Frodo is the carrier of the burden of man in the form of the One Ring and, much like Christ, is carrying the burden of human sin. The One Ring was created from malice and evil and corrupts all who come into contact with it. Frodo, and Hobbits in general, are only able to resist the evil because of the purity of their hearts. Frodo is literally making a journey to save the people of Middle Earth, which is similar to Christ's journey for human redemption. Both Christ and Frodo's missions will lead to their earthly demise, which for both was foreshadowed at various points in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Bible*. It is only on his journey to the Grey Havens/ Undying Lands, like Christ ascension to Heaven, does Frodo find eternal peace.