Advanced English: Literature, Society and (pseudo-)History - Heroic Fantasy - Fleeing or Fighting Reality?

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This course is meant for students of the advanced C1 and C2 levels. Theme-based language classes aim at developing written and oral skills through the study of a specific topic.

Course Objectives

This is a 12-week course exploring the origins of the genre called "Heroic Fantasy" as a means of improving the student's use of English. The course has three main objectives:

- Introducing students to the emergence and subsequent popularity of heroic fantasy
- Facilitating the critical discussion of selected works in view of the historical, literary, geographical and social contexts
- Developing research writing and critical analysis through oral and written assignments.

Background

Heroic Fantasy came into its own as a literary genre in the twentieth century as a reaction to an increasingly mechanized and industrialized world, drawing from the historical and mythological past. Heroic Fantasy is based on a concept of «world-building», the elaboration of a «secondary world», hence distinct from our own.

The genre was pioneered by two authors coming from vastly different backgrounds, who defined and codified its every aspect. The American pulp writer Robert E. Howard (1906-1936) crystallized the genre with the creation of *Conan the Cimmerian* in 1932. J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973), a professor at Oxford, published *The Lord of the Rings* in 1954 and 1955. Those works became cultural phenomena in the mid-sixties, at a time when America was entering one of the most troubled phases of its history. In other words, worlds of fantasy were the perfect tools to escape the grim realities of the real one.

The Course

This course focuses on the genre's formation, development and popularity. It will follow a mostly chronological approach, concentrating notably on the following aspects:

- Defining "fantasy", "heroic fantasy" and "sword and sorcery": what makes a literary genre? When does it become one?

- The birth of modern literary fantasy: fantasy as a reaction to the civilization process in England (the Industrial Revolution and the Victorian era) and in the United States (Wall Street, the Great Depression, and the end of the Frontier)
- Robert E. Howard: Conan, a character to survive the Great Depression
- World-building: to what extent is an imaginary world that imaginary?
- Fantasy and social class: confronting American and British fantasy
- The specific context of the 1960s: fleeing reality to find refuge in fantasy?
- Fantasy and ethnocentrism: the controversy of race representations and stereotypes in post-Civil Rights America
- Gender issues: the representation of women in fantasy and the masculinity crisis.

Movie adaptations: how *Conan the Cimmerian* became *Conan the Barbarian* while *The Lord of the Rings* remained (mostly) *The Lord of the Rings*?

Organization

Activities will cover the four language skills. While in-class discussion will emphasize **speaking** (including oral presentations and discussions), preparation will require **reading** (including literary stories, literary material, contemporary and modern reviews, book covers, paintings, comic-book adaptations, parodies and pastiches, as well as movie posters and extracts), critical **writing**, and **listening** (including film extracts and recordings).