Creating Life-long Readers Using YA Literature as a Bridge to the Classics

OLGA FERNÁNDEZ VICENTE

ABSTRACT

Secondary school teachers should support the development of their students' reading preferences and of their reading autonomy. Unfortunately, most of the literary pieces used in the secondary classroom contain characters and situations with which our students do not identify. We seem to ignore that being able to appreciate classical literature takes time and an academic maturity that many school students have not yet developed. It is a reality that students must become readers first and then develop the necessary skills to understand more complex plots and the literary techniques used to achieve them. In this work we propose that an intertextual study that uses youth literature as a base can help students create links that allow them to face more complex texts with greater confidence in their reading skills. On the other hand, we also claim that the nature of literacy has changed with the appearance of new technologies and contend that we should bear in mind that printed literature is not the only useful 'literature' we can recommend to our students. Eventually, we propose the use of Jung's theory of the archetypes so as to employ YA literature as a bridge to the classics.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Olga Fernández Vicente, PhD
UNIR/UPV/EHU, Spain
olga_agur@hotmail.com

Reading works of Spanish and universal literature in the secondary classroom should be a free experience that became a source of pleasure and led to the personal enrichment of our students while supporting the development of their own reading preferences and of their reading autonomy. However, we recommend our students to approach the most representative works of literature through fragments or complete works and to be able to recognize the author's intention when writing the work, its theme and its relationship with the historical context to which it belongs, in addition to the characteristics of the genre it represents. That is, most teachers want their students to acquire knowledge about different literary genres such as the novel, theatre or poetry and, in addition, to be able to identify the different elements that make up those works such as the theme, style or the plot and to become familiar with literary terms such as climax, figurative language or denouement. Furthermore, in our desire to educate them in literature, we tell our students what is important and how they should understand the work or its meaning. In other words, we take away their freedom to express their own reactions to the work by offering them our own 'correct' interpretation based on literary criticism, information collected throughout our university years, teacher guides, or the textbook. Obviously, we are guided by our love for literature and reading, which leads us to assume that what we select and interpret is the best for our students. In other words, we end up being an active part of the role that school plays in the formation of young readers formulated by Daniel Pennac *in Better than Life*:

> [I]t looks as though school, no matter the age or nation, has had only one role. And that's to teach the mastery of technique and critical commentary and to cut off spontaneous contact with books by discouraging the pleasure of reading. It's written in stone in every land: pleasure has no business in school, and knowledge gained must be the fruit of deliberate suffering. A defensible position, of course. No lack of arguments in its favour. School cannot be a place of pleasure, with all the freedom that would imply. School is a factory, and we need to know which workers are up to snuff. (91–92)

Indeed, we cannot ignore the fact that once the lesson becomes the primary reason for using a book, reading becomes a chore. According to the study carried out by the Lazarillo Research Group of the University of Cantabria, a good part of the classics recommended in the 3rd and 4th years of secondary education (ESO) in Spanish classrooms belong to canon literature. In short, this kind of literature can be defined as works written for adults or without a defined audience. We seem to forget the fact that young adults or teenagers, whose nature is basically self-centred, prefer to read about people as similar to themselves as possible. Bearing this in mind, it is surprising that some pieces of classical Spanish theatre continue to be recommended in spite of the fact that they are clearly far from the interests of our young adolescents, such as, for example, *El Sí de las Niñas*, written by Leandro Fernández de Moratín and first staged on January 24, 1806, *Don Álvaro y la Fuerza del Sino*, written by the Duke of Rivas and staged on March 22, 1835, or classics such as *Zalacaín el Aventurero*, written by Pío Baroja and published in 1908 or *La Regenta* by Leopoldo Alas, Clarín published in two volumes in 1884 and 1885. We seem to keep forgetting that the literary education that we offer our students should be appropriate to their interests and abilities if our aim is to increase their motivation and awake in them an interest in reading. Let's take as an example the first paragraph of *La Regenta*, a social criticism of nineteenth-century Spanish society:

> *La heroica ciudad dormía la siesta. El viento Sur, caliente y perezoso, empujaba las nubes blanquecinas que se rasgaban al correr hacia el Norte. En las calles no había más ruido que el rumor estridente de los remolinos de polvo, trapos, pajas y papeles que iban de arroyo en arroyo, de acera en acera, de esquina en esquina revolando y persiguiéndose, como mariposas que se buscan y huyen y que el aire envuelve en sus pliegues invisibles. Cual turbas de pilluelos, aquellas migajas de la basura, aquellas sobras de todo se juntaban en un montón, parábanse como dormidas un momento y brincaban de nuevo sobresaltadas, dispersándose, trepando unas por las paredes hasta los cristales temblorosos de los faroles, otras hasta los carteles de papel mal pegado a las esquinas, y había pluma que llegaba a un tercer piso, y arenilla que se incrustaba para días, o para años, en la vidriera de un escaparate, agarrada a un plomo.* [The heroic city napped. The south wind, hot and lazy, pushed the whitish clouds that were torn as they glided towards the north. In the streets there was no other noise than the shrill sound of the swirls of dust, rags, straws and papers that went from stream to stream, from sidewalk to sidewalk, from corner to corner,

fluttering and chasing each other, like butterflies that fly to and from each other and that the air envelops in its invisible folds. Like crowds of urchins, those crumbs of the garbage, those leftovers of everything gathered in a heap, stopped as if asleep for a moment and jumped up again, startled, dispersing, some climbing the walls to the trembling glass of the lanterns, others to the posters of paper badly glued to the corners, and there was a feather that reached a third floor, and grit that got encrusted for days, or for years, in the window of a shop window, clinging to a lead.] (my trans.; par. 1)

Undoubtedly a piece of art, it is not our intention to question the indisputable value of this literary work but the interest it could arouse in high school students who, in the first place, would have to make an effort to understand the language in which it's written. Let's move on to a fragment of the novel *Las Chicas de Alambre* (*Wired Girls*) by Sierra i Fabra published in 1999 which narrates a journey through the hidden face of those models who are the dream of millions of teenagers:

—*Buenos días, Jon —me deseó, antes de darme directamente la noticia—: Tu madre quiere verte ya mismo.*

Me olí la bronca. Mamá es de las que aterriza en la oficina a las nueve en punto. Como un reloj. Ella no actúa «fuera», claro. Ya no ha de tomar aviones, ni quedar con gente que vive lejos, ni...

—*¿Cuándo ha dado la orden de busca y captura? —Hace una hora. Y la ha repetido hace veinte minutos. Eso era mucho. Me la iba a ganar. Despedirme, no podía despedirme, pero casi.* ['Good morning, Jon,' he wished me, before giving me the news directly: 'Your mother wants to see you right now.' I smelled the scolding. Mom is one of those who lands in the office at nine o'clock. Like clockwork. She doesn't act 'outdoors,' of course. She no longer has to take planes, nor meet with people who live far away, nor...—When did she give the search and capture order? -An hour ago. And she repeated it twenty minutes ago. That was a lot. I was in for it. She couldn't actually fire me, but almost.] (my trans.; 3)

Students would certainly identify more easily with the language, the agility in the rhythm and the situation described in the second work than in the first one as we must bear in mind that secondary school students, especially boys, want action, adventure and suspense. In other words, what they are looking for in books is entertainment and most classics do not provide it:

[T]eachers profess that by representing the classics, they are really increasing reading enthusiasm or teaching appreciation of great works or both. It is disturbing that the protocols indicate that exactly the opposite is happening to many of the young. (Carlsen and Sherrill 136)

Unfortunately, most of the literary pieces used in the secondary classroom contain characters and situations with which our students do not identify. It is a fact, classics are not about the concerns of a teenager. On the contrary, they are works that were written for educated adults. In the same way, we also seem to forget that they were written to be enjoyed, not dissected or analysed, much less to be assessed on them. Likewise, we fail to realize that even our brightest students are still adolescents with typical adolescent problems and needs, and we ignore the fact that one of the most valuable characteristics of contemporary youth literature is that it helps adolescents feel understood and part of something.

It is a fact that being able to appreciate classical literature takes time and an academic maturity that many high school students have not yet developed (Calvino); indeed, adolescents "need to encounter literature for which they possess the intellectual, emotional, and experiential equipment" (Rosenblatt 26), and this is youth literature, which can be described as a story that addresses the complex issues that arise throughout the journey that adolescents undertake in search of their identity. This journey is usually narrated by a clearly adolescent voice that indisputably has the same literary value as that of the authors of 'adult' literature (Stephens). In this way, we can claim the effectiveness of the use of youth literature to support the development of reading comprehension and to involve the adolescent in analytical reading. What's more, it helps students develop an interest in reading (Gallo).

Even though it is true that to date there are few studies on the way in which we can use youth literature as a bridge to reach our classics, it is a reality that students must become readers first and then develop the necessary skills to understand more complex plots and the literary techniques used to achieve them. In this work, we propose that an intertextual study which uses youth literature as a base can help students create links that allow them to face more complex texts with greater confidence in their reading skills. In this way, by using this type of works we can teach the same literary concepts and develop the same analytical skills in a more effective way. Contemporary youth literature includes a symbolism and vocabulary that is not as complex as in most classics, characters whose personalities, actions and interrelationships can be analysed, and figurative language, irony and foreshadowing, just as classical literature does.

Notwithstanding the fact that some teachers maintain that youth literature is not sophisticated or complex, studies carried out in this regard demonstrate that many youth novels contain complex plot lines as well as memorable characters (Crowe; Glaus; Miller; Santoli and Wagner). Yet, many secondary school teachers still identify the teaching of literature with the teaching of the classics. They believe that all students need to read the classics because these will give them "exposure to the mainstream culture and the philosophical tenets and ethical values of the Western world" (Christenbury 15). Hence, do we fear that if we do not teach the classics we will become an uneducated society? On the contrary, together with Probst we contend that

> The suggestion that adolescent literature be granted a place in the literature curriculum is not a compromise. It doesn't weaken the curriculum by displacing the great works. Rather, it strengthens it by offering students the emotional and intellectual experiences of significant reading – the same sort of experiences that skilled adults may have with the established great books of the culture. It invites them to participate at their own level in the ongoing dialog about the major issues of human life. (224)

Before the emergence of youth literature in the late 1960s, works such as Stratemeyer's *Nancy Drew*, Tom Swift's novels of the same name, or Gilbert Patten's *The Adventures of Frank Merriwell*, were considered literature for adolescents. These novels avoided controversial topics such as sexuality, substance use, divorce or death and largely focused on a single socioeconomic class with white, middle-class characters. As a result, many literary critics considered them superficial because they lacked credibility in representing the real nature of adolescent lives and, consequently, they did not form part of the school curriculum. The turning point for youth literature came in 1967 with the publication of *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton, which describes the problems of young people isolated from society, followed by the appearance of *The Contender* by Robert Lipsyte, which reflects the hopes and despair of young African-Americans, *The Chosen* by Chaim Potok, which delves into the internal conflicts of two young Jewish teenagers, and *Mr and Mrs Bo Jo Jones* by Ann Head, which deals with teenage pregnancies. Following the path opened by these pioneers, many other authors decided to change the focus of youth literature and began dealing with topics that reflected the reality of adolescent life and offered readers an honest point of view about the hopes, fears and dilemmas of the main characters in their novels. Furthermore, they included in their novels the same elements that can be found in literature for adults: a consistent point of view, real characters, realistic and fresh dialogues, an attractive style, a significant setting and a well-developed but not complex plot.

Yet, Gary Salvner states that many teachers do not use youth literature in the classroom because they consider the inclusion of youth literature in the curriculum a waste of time in the belief that some of these works lack the necessary quality. Furthermore, teacher's guides and textbooks do not usually include these works. However, Diana Mitchell and colleagues state that due to the fact that youth literature turns complex problems into something concrete and understandable, students can relate it to their lives. For their part, in *From Hinton to Hamlet: Building Bridges between Young Adult Literature and the Classics*, Herz and Gallo affirm that youth literature deals with many universal themes, including the eternal questions of 'who I am' or 'where I belong', that is, they contain the same themes as classical literature: isolation from the group or society, survival or the need to face a challenge, as wells as social or political issues referring to ethnic or racial discrimination, social concerns about AIDS, teenage pregnancies, divorce or substance abuse, problems resulting from family conflicts, fear of death or political injustice.

Figure 1 Bernarda Alba Comic.

(Source: https://burgosartecomic.com/category/comic-bernarda-alba/).

In the aforementioned book, Herz and Gallo list numerous novels of youth literature and their literary elements, connecting them with several classics of literature with the intention of proving that including youth literature in the classroom can have as much or even more value than limiting ourselves to teaching the classics. For his part, Salvner confirms Herz's proposal by showing how brilliant characterizations can be found in novels such as *A Bridge to Terathibia* by Katherine Paterson, *The Great Gilly Hopkins* by the same author, or *Permanent Connections* by Sue Ellen Bridgers. Likewise, he describes the way in which youth literature portrays those human conflicts that carry thematic and symbolic elements in *The Chocolate War* by Charlotte and Peter Fiell or *After the First Death* by Robert Comier. Correspondingly, he illustrates how we can use works such as *I am the Cheese* by Charlotte and Peter Fiell or *A Hero Ain't Nothing but a Sandwich* by Alice Childress to work on perspective and critical thinking. Finally, he demonstrates that the use of youth works in the classroom can help us save time, since most of these works are not as long or complex as the classics (Salvner). In turn, Virginia Monseau and Gary Salvner state that youth literature, in addition to immersing adolescents in stories they want to read about, offers them the opportunity to develop and practice their critical thinking and to create their own opinions about what they find important. Finally, Christenbury agrees with the opinions expressed on the matter and adds that classics often include complex syntax and vocabulary, intricate plots, and employ multiple characters that inhabit geographical locations unknown to adolescents.

Thus, we propose, based on the existing literature, that by relating youth literature to the classics we will see our students develop their reading abilities, relating, comparing and drawing parallels between the elements of classic works and youth literature. However, we are not fooled, obviously; finding the right book to pair with the classic is not an easy task and requires knowledge of the works of youth literature as well as the classics, but it is not an impossible task either. On the other hand, a short story, poem, scene from a play, magazine or newspaper article, as well as a website can be used to introduce a unit, draw comparisons, reinforce a point, or tie up loose ends at the end of a session. By the same token, we need to bear in mind that printed literature is not the only useful 'literature' that we can recommend to our students. On the contrary, we should take into consideration the use of videos, CDs, comics, audiobooks or CD-ROM programs. For example, we could use the comic (Figure 1) or animated video based on *The House of Bernarda Alba* to help our students contextualize this recommended reading in secondary or high school.

As we know, *The House of Bernarda Alba* was the last play that Lorca wrote before his death in 1936. The play became a cry against an unjust society that silenced women. The central theme of the play is the clash between the traditional and authoritarian morality of Bernarda, their mother, and the desire for freedom of María Josefa and Adela. After the death of her husband,

Bernarda imposes an 8-year mourning period on her house based on her authority as head of the family. Once locked up, we witness the suffocating atmosphere of a home empty of love and the daughters' obsession with being single. Indeed, two of the most recurring themes regarding women in Lorca's work are sterility and singleness, especially taking into account that the only aspirations of women at that time were marriage and motherhood. Undoubtedly, twenty-first-century teenagers might find the situation hard to understand and would probably benefit from the use of some visual aid.

Furthermore, it is a fact that the nature of literacy has changed at great speed with the appearance of new technologies (DiSessa; Dresang and McClelland; Leu and Kinzer; Reinking et al.; Tapscott). Electronic texts present new supports and challenges that can have an effect on the reader's ability to understand them. Selfe summarizes the change experienced in the literacy process after the appearance of the Internet as follows:

> Today, the definition of literacy has expanded from traditional notions of reading and writing to include the ability to learn, comprehend, and interact with technology in a meaningful way. (qtd. in Pianfetti 256)

Thus, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) expands the concept of reading, since, while the traditional text is based on the combination of two types of media, printing and two-dimensional graphics, electronic texts incorporate a series of symbols and multiple multimedia formats (López-Andrada). Coiro states that the comprehension process is different on the Internet since ICT creates multimodal models within which the new reading comprehension objective is not clearly defined. While traditional texts include the combination of two types of media, that is, two-dimensional graphics and printing, electronic texts offer multiple symbols and multimedia formats that incorporate animated symbols, icons, caricatures, photographs, audio, advertising, video clips, virtual reality environments, as well as new ways of displaying information through non-traditional combinations of font and colour (Brunner and Tally). Furthermore,

> We live in a society that is experiencing an explosion of alternative texts […] electronic texts that incorporate hyperlinks and hypermedia introduce some complications in defining comprehension because they require skills and abilities beyond those required for the comprehension of conventional, linear print. (RAND Reading Study Group xiv-14)

In fact, we might as well take advantage of the fact that "[o]ur students today are all 'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" (Prensky 1) to help them approach some of the most challenging works of contemporary literature, such as Joyce's *Ulysses*. Published in 1922, Joyce's masterpiece is generally defined as a hard-reading text, yet we propose the creation of an escape room to help our students approach this dense and exhilarating text. In our project, students are offered the opportunity to listen to the recorded version of the novel as well as to complete some missions which will enable them to continue reading the novel.
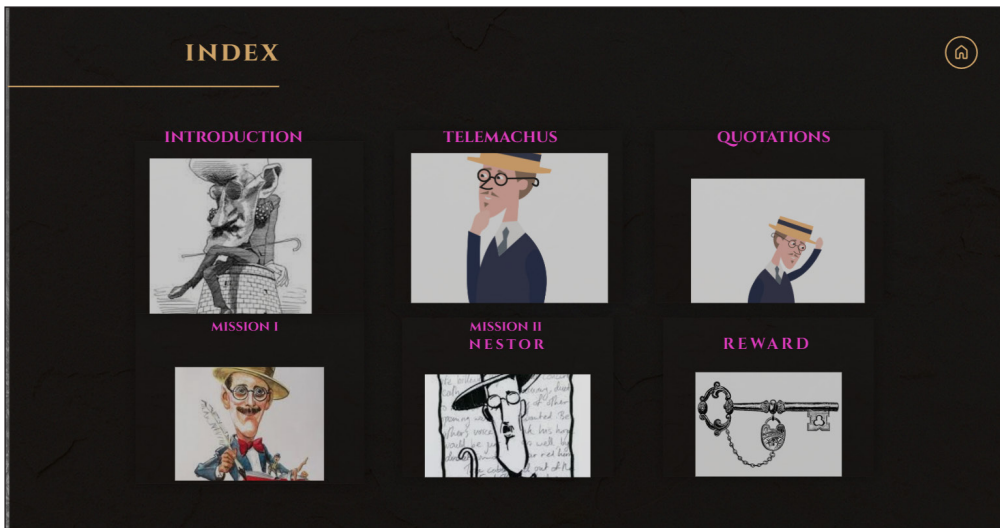

Figure 2 Escape Room Cover.

Figure 3 Escape Room Index. (Source: Own Elaboration).

Not only will students get the more general information but also a more detailed one, such as explanations of the main quotes extracted from the novel.
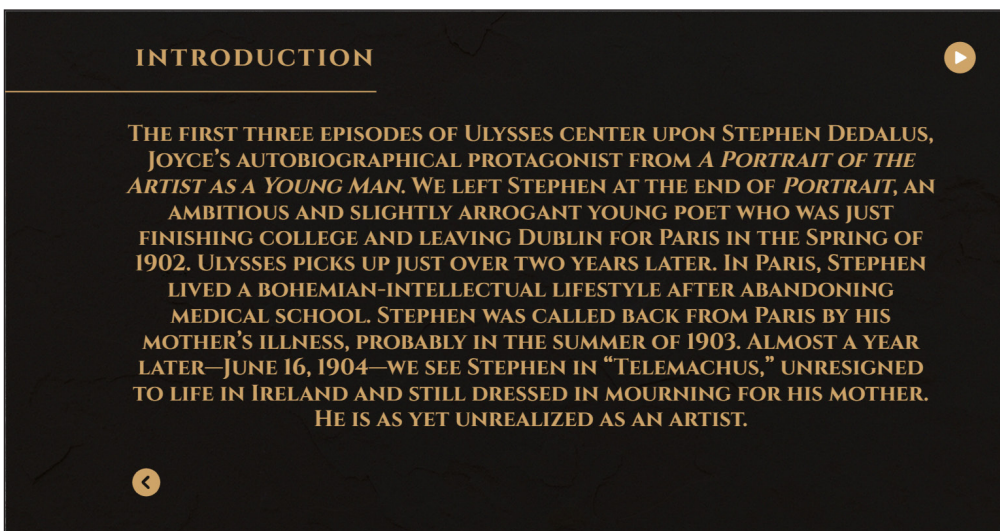

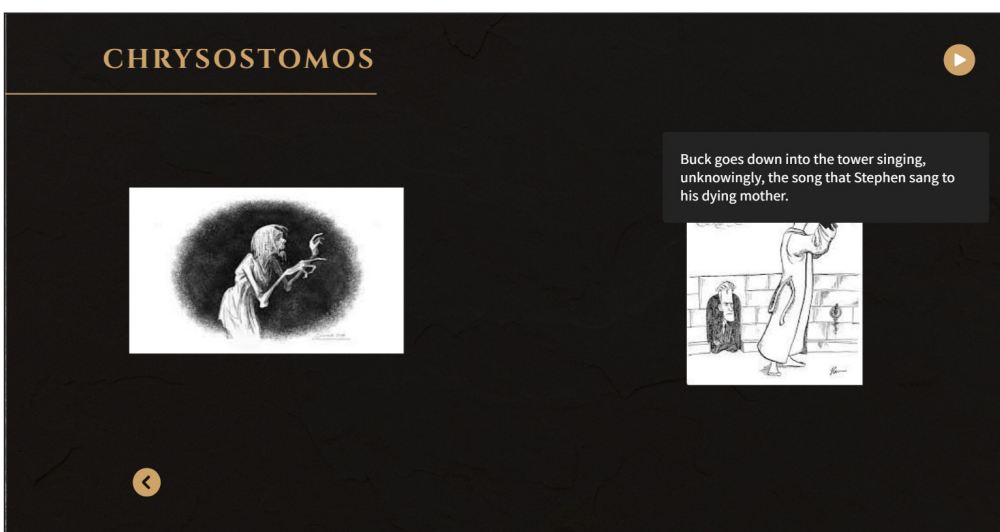**Figure 4** Escape Room Introduction to *Ulysses*.

Figure 5 Escape Room. Detailed Explanations. (Source: Own Elaboration).

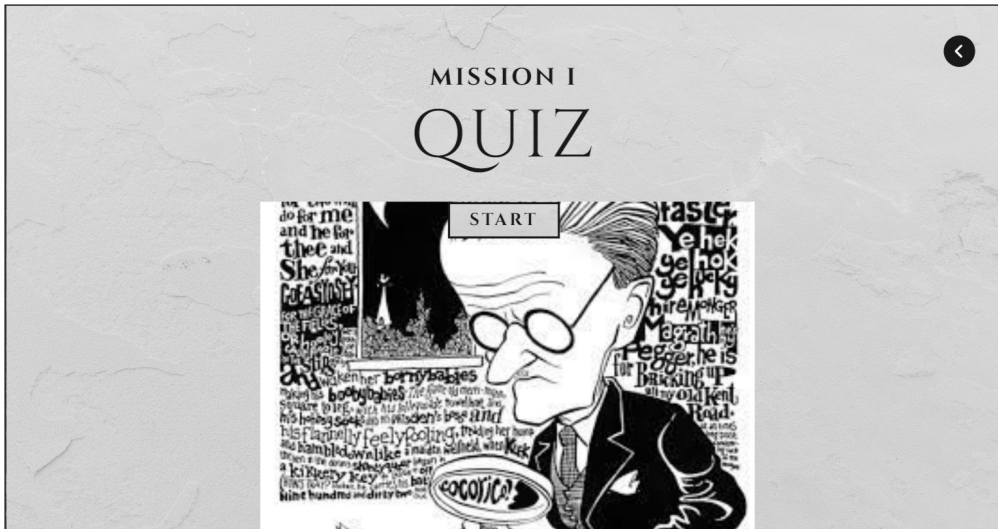Once the students feel prepared to continue reading through *Ulysses*, they will have to face a mission to check if they have understood the chapter they have read.
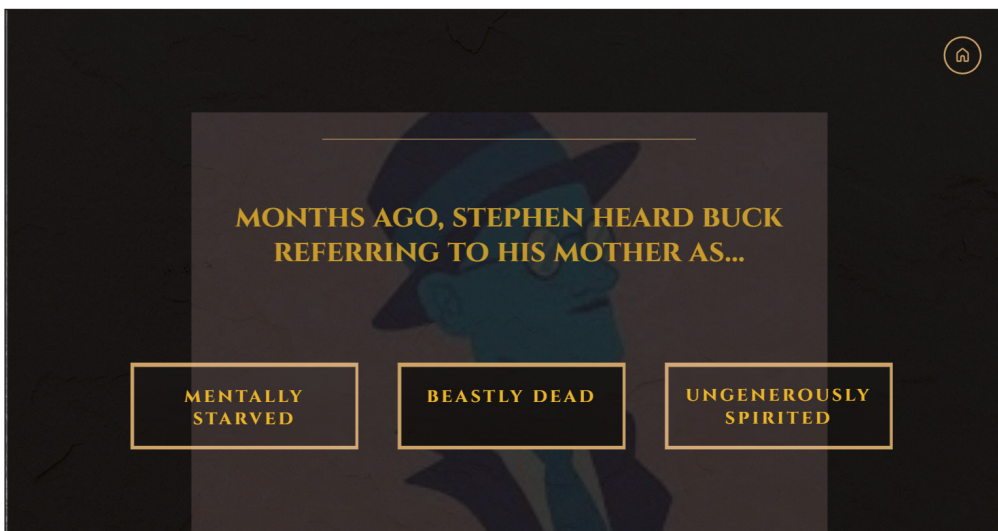
Figure 6 Mission I.

Figure 7 Escape Room Quiz Example.

(Source: Own Elaboration).

Yet, if we do not have the time or the means to get involved in such a demanding and time-consuming project, we can also employ Jung's theory of the archetypes and YA literature to help our students understand the classics. As defined by Jung, the archetype is "a figure […] that constantly recurs in the course of history and appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed" (Jung 817). The patterns represented in the archetypes are familiar to us as they present some certain traits which are common in oral and written literature and cinema. Most YA literature includes situational archetypes such as testing as a rite of passage, the hero's quest, birth/death/rebirth, and the search for self. Hence, based on Jung's theory of archetypes, we can examine a character with certain characteristics or a recurring situation in literature that provokes a deep emotional response in readers because it resonates with an image that already exists in the unconscious (Jung). Thus, we state that by reading YA literature which reflects those archetypes that appear in adult literature or the classics, teens can begin to understand the concept of recurring archetypes. Let's take as an example the situational archetype: Birth/Death/Rebirth. The main character is immersed in a conflictive situation. It is through pain and suffering that his spirit survives the challenge, that is, through a process of self-knowledge, the character is reborn. Often the archetypal hero finds himself in danger as a baby and is adopted either by 'ordinary people' or by animals. Whether by his own choice or by chance, the hero is suddenly forced or decides to embark on a great adventure, unaware of its end. From that moment on, the archetypal hero has to overcome different challenges. He will travel to a dark world in which he will face different forces or individuals. At one point in his journey, he will meet a wise man who will provide him with the necessary information to achieve his goal. Only then will the hero understand what his mission is. Once discovered, the archetypal hero will begin to test his limits until a crucial moment when his experience culminates. At that point, the hero earns his reward and is forever changed as a result of this experience, usually acquiring new powers and beginning to use them. Finally, the hero returns to his society that

will benefit from his new powers and, in a way, will manage to restore and heal his society. In classic literature we can find this situational archetype in Theseus, for instance, who, before killing the Minotaur, lived a relatively obscure life as the son of Aegeus, king of Athens and Aethra. On the other hand, within young adult literature, J.K. Rowling's character, Harry Potter, follows the same sequence in his initiation journey within *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. At the beginning of the novel, Harry lives a normal, everyday life. As he turns 10, he discovers more about his past, and, even more importantly, about his future. He finds out where his parents came from and how they died. He faces various challenges and adversaries, aided by the forces of good within the wizarding world of modern-day England. Nikolajeva claims that the circumstances surrounding Harry's childhood make him a perfect archetypal hero, but not a "genuine mythic hero" (226):

> The Harry Potter figure has all the necessary components of the romantic hero. There are mystical circumstances around his birth, he is dislocated and oppressed and suddenly given unlimited power. His innocence and intrinsic benevolence make him superior to the evil—adult—forces. He bears the mark of the chosen on his forehead, and he is worshipped in the wizard community as the future savior. (226)

Still, we can state that Harry Potter is a typical archetype of the hero. Furthermore, we claim that understanding these archetypal ascendants will enable us to understand why adolescents eager to know the dangers and pleasures of heroism feel so attracted to the young wizard (Schafer).

However, in order to confirm the presence of these archetypes in classics we can turn to Joyce's work again. The account of Stephen Dedalus's development from the child in *A portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* through *Ulysses* complies with the transformation process of the psyche outlined by Jung in "The Psychology of the Child Archetype". The first two stages in this process, the 'misunderstood' and the unjustly treated child with haughty pretensions and the epiphany of the hero, are the topic of *A Portrait*, while *Ulysses* covers the third stage, the drifting of the centre of the personality from the ego to the self. Thus, if *Ulysses* can be said to be the book of the shadow (personified in Bloom), *A Portrait* is the book of the hero (Stephen) (Kimball). Yet, these are not the only archetypes to be found in both classics and YA literature. We can also propose an analysis of the archetype of the terrible mother personified in Bernarda Alba and see if we could, through youth literature, help our young adults understand the situation posed in the work. The archetype of the terrible mother is the trigger for the action that leads to catastrophic consequences due to the climate of competition and resentment that Bernarda generates among her daughters, as well as the repressive atmosphere that prevails in the home. According to Jung, the maternal complex taken to the extreme leads to a hypertrophy of the maternal, according to which a woman's only goal is to procreate. It is for this reason that they feel rejection of everything related to sensuality and see in man a mere object to carry out their mission. Once they become mothers, they become beings totally dependent on their daughters over whom they exercise a right of possession. Empty of love, they become destructive beings, the negative face of the mother archetype. This archetype also exists in youth literature that narrates experiences of abuse by mothers. We can use as examples Myriam Pressler's *If Luck Comes Put a Chair on It* or *Secrets 6.1.* by Jacqueline Wilson, works that revolve around the archetype of the terrible mother but place the reader in an adolescent world with which they may feel familiar and that can serve as a bridge to understand Lorca's work.

To conclude this small approach to the topic, we would like to emphasize the fact that we should provide our students with literature that is accessible to them even though it does not exactly meet the requirements that we have established to determine if a work can be considered as a masterpiece or not. We propose that the use of YA literature as a bridge to the classics would help create lifelong readers. On the other hand, we must also bear in mind that electronic texts include a series of symbols and multimedia formats that invite the reader to become, in a sense, co-author of the text by selecting their path and constructing their own adaptation of the information. In fact, Goldstone points out that authors of postmodern texts become facilitators who encourage the reader to actively construct their own story by "cobuilding the framework, supplying missing features of the story structure, and pulling together discrete narrative strands" (366). Consequently, the existence of a new attitude of the reader in relation to reading as a place of omnidirectional experiences cannot be ignored.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Olga Fernández Vicente, PhD 🔴 orcid.org/0000-0001-5882-9004
UNIR/UPV/EHU, Spain

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