

*Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*:  
Didactic and Mimetic Cult Movies for Young Adult Viewers  
by Lance Novak  
University of Wisconsin—Stout: Young Adult Literature

Cult movies are undoubtedly a phenomenon that has no end in sight. Ultimately, when it comes to young adults and the pop culture mediums they so loyally follow, cult movies seem to be much more than just Hollywood films that young adults can relate to, laugh about, and mimic. In a sense, cult movies can serve as didactic and mimetic forms of art where adolescents can learn something tangible about life, maturation, and finding their place in the world. In the history of cult films, numerous paradigms come to mind: *The Graduate*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* all seem to characterize what a cult movie entails in one way or another; they all portray coming-of-age teenagers or young adults who are trying to find self-individuation in a confusing, fast-paced, and post-modern world. By the end of these stories, one gets the sense that young adult viewers have been instructed and delighted simultaneously. But no matter how many examples of cult movies one expatiates upon, two films—or trilogies of films—seem to be extant in the way they serve young adults in a didactic and mimetic fashion: George Lucas's *Star Wars* and Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*.

As one critic commented, “one of the great classic movies of today is *Star Wars*. When *Star Wars* first appeared in 1979, it was a modest success” (Harlan, Loertscher, & McElmeel, 2005, p. 30). Of course, this “modest” success eventually became one of the biggest anomalies in the history of Hollywood filmmaking, as millions of viewers flocked to theatres in order to see characters such as Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and Chewbacca battle the evil Empire, led by none other than the infamous and iniquitous Darth Vader and his seemingly invincible army of storm-troopers. Throughout the “first” three films (which are actually episodes 4, 5, and 6 within a larger storyline), Luke must endure many ordeals and adventures in order to succeed in his quest, and essentially, his toils and burdens seem to symbolize the toils and burdens teenagers go through in order to reach their own maturation.

Indeed, the *Star Wars* trilogy was so mesmerizing for viewers that it undoubtedly caused a rupture of some sort in the way young audiences think of cult films in general. Even though the *Star Wars* films are set deep in space—with no mischievous teenagers or house party themes—they are still able to capture young viewers' attention implicitly because of the archetypal story they tell. *Star Wars* revolves around Luke Skywalker's quest to find out who he really is—and who he's destined to become—in a massive galaxy filled with “good” guys and “bad” guys. He must find self-individuation or self-realization with the help of an

archetypal wise old man named Obi Wan Kenobi. Indeed, this archetypal quest, known to Jungian scholars as “the journey quest of the hero,” has existed for centuries, and in this case, it implicitly helps young adult viewers interpret and understand *Star Wars* for what it really is: a quest to find one’s place in a world full of trouble. The fact that Lucas’s trilogy follows this “journey quest of the hero” is significant in that it helps *Star Wars* become a didactic and mimetic form of art that young adult viewers can understand, learn from, and appreciate. Perhaps this is why Lucas’s *Star Wars* trilogy is one of the most significant contributions to the world of cult movies to begin with. As Ansen (2005) suggested, Lucas’s “wide-eyed, childlike approach to storytelling—cute robots, scary villains, selfless heroics, fortune-cookie wisdom, and wild roller-coaster rides through space . . . has changed the cultural landscape” (p. 62). Ultimately, the filmmaker knew what he was doing when he began developing and writing his archetypal story, and “like all great pop artists, Lucas . . . read the dream life of the nation” (Goldstein, 2005, p. 8).

Indeed, if Lucas truly was reading the dream life of America, perhaps it was J.R.R. Tolkien who was reading the dream life of his beloved England. While *Star Wars* takes place in a galaxy far, far away, Tolkien’s world revolves around a place called “Middle Earth,” a world that looks curiously like our own Earth—except for the fact that Tolkien’s world is purposely much older and more antiquated. Peter Jackson’s vision of Tolkien’s epic story is another conspicuous example of a cult movie—or trilogy of cult movies—that is simultaneously instructive and delightful for young adult viewers.

Once again, the audience is provided with a heroic character (Frodo Baggins) searching for self-individuation in a world full of trouble. Evil wizards, despicable-looking orcs and trolls, and ghost-like apparitions riding ominous-looking horses try to hunt down Frodo while he attempts to destroy a powerful ring that can essentially help him rule Middle Earth if he so chooses (while destroying him at the same time). One might make the plausible argument that Frodo’s toils and burdens, no matter how epic, far-fetched, and larger-than-life they may seem, reflect and symbolize the toils and burdens adolescents go through in their own lives. As Alleva (2004) suggested, the underlying theme of Jackson’s films is the “necessity to cling stubbornly and absolutely to virtue . . . in the face of absolute evil” (p. 21). Alleva (2004) goes on to argue that the most important virtue of the films “is the capacity for friendship” (p. 21). Ultimately, teaching a young adult audience about the importance of friendship—or the dialectic opposition between “good” and “evil”—are trends that will never go out of style.

As Harlan, Loertscher, & McElmeel (2005) noted, cult movies “elicit a fiery passion in devoted fans, and may cause cultists to enthusiastically champion these films, leading to audience participation and repetitive viewings and showings” (p. 30). Film releases such as *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings* have witnessed long lines of costume-wearing fans who have packed the theatre

houses of America time and time again in order to re-experience films that have inevitably become timeless classics. Young viewers dress up as Darth Vader, Luke Skywalker, and Frodo Baggins in an effort to be involved in the films in any way that they can. No matter what argument one makes regarding how strange this phenomenon may or may not be, one thing is evident: George Lucas's *Star Wars* and Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* are didactic and mimetic entities that help young viewers learn something important about life, maturation, and finding their place in the world. Because of their underlying archetypal themes, these film trilogies will remain cult movie classics with universal appeal.

References:

- Alleva, R. (2004). Peter jackson's sorcery. *Commonweal*, 131(2). Retrieved June 15, 2006, from Ebsco Host Academic Search Elite Research Database.
- Ansen, D. (2005). The end of the empire. *Newsweek*, 145(20). Retrieved June 15, 2006, from Ebsco Host Academic Search Elite Research Database.
- Goldstein, R. (2005). Spectacle: Sith happens. *The Nation*, 280(24). Retrieved June 15, 2006, from Ebsco Host Academic Search Elite Research Database.
- Harlan, M., Loertscher, D., & McElmeel, S. (2005). *Young adult literature and multimedia: A quick guide*. Salt Lake City: Hi Willow Research & Publishing.