

Sarah Downey

English 102: Inquiry into Premodernity in Popular Culture

Course Description:

The tremendous popularity of the recent *Lord of the Rings* films is only one of many indications that ancient and medieval cultures, along with creative re-interpretations thereof, hold a strong fascination for present-day audiences. This course poses a number of questions about why Europe's premodern past has such vast appeal in North American popular culture. We will examine tensions and differences (if any) between historical fiction and fantasy fiction, as well as differences between academic and popular writing on premodern culture and its present-day appropriations. Through discussion of historical and pseudo-historical roleplaying and re-enactment, from live historical re-enactment to massively multiplayer online fantasy roleplaying games, we will explore questions of self-construction and persona, escapism and subcreation, historical authenticity and accuracy, and, eventually, some of the complex connotations of the terms "reality" and "modernity." Readings will include *Beowulf*, essays by J.R.R. Tolkien and Umberto Eco, and Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*.