Medievalism

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of "medievalism" is the
"beliefs and practices (regarded as) characteristic of the Middle Ages; the adoption of, adherence
to, or inter in medieval ideals, styles, or usages" ("Medievalism"). This definition makes a
reference to the medieval culture as well as the attitude toward the culture. However, that is the
most modern definition. The term "medievalism" was first known to be used in 1853 by John
Ruskin, merely meaning the word to be no more than just a synonym for the Middle Ages
(Diebold 247). In later years, Leslie Workman, an editor of medievalism studies defines this term
as "the study of the reception of the Middle Ages after the medieval era" (Diebold 248).
Workman says:

> But the Middle Ages quite simply has no objective correlative…It follows quite simply
> that medieval historiography, the study of the successive recreation of the Middle Ages
> by different generations, *is* the Middle Ages. And this of course if medievalism (Diebold
> 250).

Contrary to popular belief, the ever-so-famous gargoyles that are present in many
modern-day aspects of films and television show about the Middle Ages are not real
medievalism. In Michael Camille's work *The Gargoyles of Notre-Dame: Medievalism and the
Monsters of Modernity*, he talks about how gargoyles are based upon medieval models, but they
are not a true part of medieval history. Because of the rising recognition gargoyles have had
regarding medievalism, this just gives Workman concrete evidence that "medievalism is the
continuing process of creating the Middle Ages" through different generations (Diebold 250).

Romanticism is also an important part of how medievalism transferred from the Middle Ages to the modern world. According to Joe Leerssen, "romanticism involved a new interest in the medieval past" (Leerssen 222). In *Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature*, romanticism was considered to be a reaction against the Enlightenment, putting emphasis on "the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous" and many others alike ("Romanticism"). Some believe that romanticism began around the 1790s from *Lyrical Ballads,* written by William Wordsworth, because he depicted poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" ("Romanticism").

Around the eighteenth century, "gothic" and the theme of darkness had been used to describe the Middle Ages (Matthews). In 1798, John Milner is the first to use "gothic" in an architectural manner in his *Dissertion on the Modern Style of Altering Antient Cathedrals* (Matthews). After that, "gothic" was then used as a "technical term" while "medieval" transformed into the old sense of "gothic," creating what the modern-day world really understands about medievalism (Matthews). The "romantic authors are implicated in the great flourish of neo-gothic public architecture" (Leerssen 222). There were many characteristics of medievalism in romantic literature, architecture, monuments, and more (Leerssen 222).

One of the most famous gothic architectural buildings is the Cathedral of Notre Dame in France. This cathedral is surrounded with arched supports and has ribbed arches on the interior of the building, along with countless amounts of windows and six large pillars ("Cathedral" 223). Before 1793, there once stood twenty-seven statues of former kings of France. Beneath one former king in particular sat a lion, one of the many gothic symbols of the era. The author who wrote the article in *The Illustrated Magazine of Art* describes some of these statues, saying:

The figure of the Almighty spreading his hands over two angels, was the Creator forming

the breath of life out of chaos; and the triumph of Marcel, near the portal to the right, with

the dragons beneath his feet, was the discovery of philosopher's stone, the two elements,

the fixed and volatile, being represented by the mouth and the tail of the dragon

("Cathedral" 223).

The statues that were fixed on the top of the cathedral were clearly very symbolic and seemed to

be symbols that reoccurred throughout the neo-gothic period. Having these tall buildings, that

seemed to be like skyscrapers during this time, was astonishing to people. The tall steeples,

arches, and stained glass were all exceptionally common for cathedrals like this ("Cathedral

223).

As for literature, *Harry Potter,* written by J.K. Rowling, is one of the greatest examples

of medievalism and neo-gothic architecture interpreted to the 21st century. "Hogwarts itself is

still rooted in the Middle Ages" even though there are more modern aspects to the novel, like the

trains, cars, and telephones (Arden 55). From the way it's described, Hogwarts is decorated with

arms and weapons that were true to the Middle Ages. The letters given to the students attending

Hogwarts also are written on parchment and "their sealing wax is stamped with a coat of arms"

(Arden 56). The four houses within Hogwarts, Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff,

are all created with a heraldic crest, like a lion or a serpent (Arden 56). The character's names

often even showed Latin roots. For example, there was Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape, and

Draco, which is actually Latin for dragon (Arden 57). Magical elements, like wands and the

invisible cloak, are presented in this work of literature. Certain animals that were "believed to

have lived during the Middle Ages" also appear in *Harry Potter*, like dragons, unicorns,

basilisks, and werewolves (Arden 56). J.K. Rowling even went as far as using correct Latin in

wizard spells, charms, and curses like "Wingardium Leviosa" to make things fly, "Serpensortia" to make a snake appear from one's wand, and "Densaugeo" to make teeth grow (Arden 57). Lastly, *Harry Potter* has some of the traditional motifs from medieval romances like "habitations, meals and feasts, journeys and transport, secrecy and deception, and tournaments and singly combat" (Arden 57). J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* is one of the most true interpretations of medievalism in the modern world.

Compared to the first definition of medievalism used by John Ruskin, the modern interpretation is entirely different. Now when the word "medieval" or "medievalism" is used, our society thinks of the gothic aspect of the Middle Ages instead of just the Middle Ages itself. Throughout the years, medievalism has been changed and reformed into this idea that we have of it now, with the intimidating and dark gothic cathedrals, dungeons, and dragons. Oddly enough, the present-day definition of medievalism isn't entirely too farfetched from the original despite the centuries that have passed.

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