

***Binti* Lesson Plan 1**

by Erika Gotfredson

Overview: This lesson serves as an introduction to the science fiction genre. In particular, it explores Nnedi Okorafor’s self-identification as a writer of Africanfuturism, a sub-category of science fiction. For this reason, this lesson is best suited for the first day of discussing *Binti*, as it will highlight some key issues and questions emerging in this novella and the other texts in the trilogy.

This lesson has been adapted from the “Introduction to Genre Fiction” exercise included in Diana Fuss and William A. Gleason’s *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 exercises for the college classroom* (Fuss and Gleason 199-201). For a useful resource on Nnedi Okorafor’s term Africanfuturism and how it applies to the *Binti* series, see Bettina Burger’s “Math and magic: Nnedi Okorafor’s *Binti* trilogy and its challenge to the dominance of Western science in science fiction.”

Lesson Topic: Introduction to Science Fiction and Africanfuturism

Objectives:

By the end of class, students will be able to:

- Define science fiction and Nnedi Okorafor’s term “Africanfuturism”
- Identify how *Binti* aligns with and diverges from the science fiction genre
- Identify and discuss the Africanfuturistic elements within *Binti*

Class Structure:

20 minutes: List genre conventions of science fiction

- Ask students to list any genre conventions of science fiction that come to mind. Keep a running list on a whiteboard or PowerPoint.
- Use the following questions to guide students’ brainstorming: “What elements does a story need to have to be in this genre? What kinds of characters, relationships, or events would you expect to encounter? What kinds of beginnings or endings? What kind of setting or time period? Why? Is there a typical consumer of this genre? If so, who? Why do people who enjoy this genre enjoy it?” (Fuss and Gleason 200). You may also ask students to list any examples of science fiction books and movies that come to mind.
- Once you have a detailed list, open the floor to debate. Are there any listed genre conventions that students do not agree with? Are there any elements that should be cut from the list? Ask students to defend their answers as they offer their arguments.
- To conclude this section of the lesson, ask students to help you draft a brief definition of science fiction based on the list you have created together.

15 minutes: Small group discussions

- Break students into small groups of 2-4 people.
- Have each group complete the following tasks:
 - Using our collective list of science fiction genre conventions, list characteristics of *Binti* that align with the genre.

- As a group, address the following: Are there any characteristics of *Binti* that do not seem to align with our definition of science fiction? Brainstorm as a group why Okorafor might be diverging from traditional conventions of the genre.

20 minutes: Class discussion

- Have students first share how *Binti* aligns with the genre. If possible, record the novella's characteristics alongside the previously generated list of science fiction genre conventions so that students can see the overlap.
- Next, ask students to identify ways in which *Binti* breaks from or doesn't align with their expectations for the genre. List these separately.
- Define Okorafor's term "Africanfuturism" for students:
Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa. It's less concerned with 'what could have been' and more concerned with 'what is and can/will be'. It acknowledges, grapples with and carries "what has been".
Africanfuturism does not HAVE to extend beyond the continent of Africa, though often it does. Its default is non-western; its default/center is African. (Okorafor, "Africanfuturism Defined")
- Ask students how they see Africanfuturistic elements appearing in the novella.

20 minutes: Close readings

- Using the lists you have generated together as a guide, perform close readings on a few passages with the class. The primary questions to be addressed through the discussion include:
 - What roles do technology and math play in Binti's success as a harmonizer?
 - How does Binti maintain her connections to her home amidst her journeys? Why is it important that she maintains these connections?
- Page 6:
My edan was more interesting than any book, than any new astrolabe design I made in my father's shop that these women would probably kill each other to buy. And it was mine, in my pocket, and these nosy women behind me could never know. Those women talked about me, the men probably did too. But none of them knew what I had, where I was going, who I was. Let them gossip and judge. Thankfully, they knew not to touch my hair again. I didn't like war either.
(Okorafor, *Binti* 6)
- Pose the following questions to students after you have read this passage together:
 - How are Binti's interactions with the Khoush informed by traditional racial stereotypes?
 - How does the characterization of Binti and her family seek to undermine those stereotypes?
- Page 9:
I was the only Himba on the ship, out of nearly five hundred passengers. My tribe is obsessed with innovation and technology, but it is small, private, and, as I said, we don't like to leave Earth. We prefer to explore the universe by traveling

inward, as opposed to outward. No Himba has ever gone to Oomza Uni. So me being the only one on the ship was not that surprising. However, just because something isn't surprising doesn't mean it's easy to deal with.

The ship was packed with outward-looking people who loved mathematics, experimenting, learning, reading, inventing, studying, obsessing, revealing. The people on the ship weren't Himba, but I soon understood that they were still my people. I stood out as a Himba, but the commonalities shined brighter. I made friends quickly. And by the second week in space, they were *good* friends.

(Okorafor, *Binti* 9)

- Pose the following questions to students after you have read this passage together:
 - What role does mathematics play within the novella and within Binti's characterization and relationships?
 - Why might mathematics hold such an important role in the development of the story?
- Page 37:

“My people are the creators and builders of astrolabes,” I said. “We use math to create the currents within them. The best of us have the gift to bring harmony so delicious that we can make atoms caress each other like lovers. That's what my sister said.” I blinked as it came to me. “I think that's why this *edan* works for me! I found it. In the desert. A wild woman there once told me that it is a piece of old old technology; she called it a ‘god stone.’ I didn't believe her then, but I do now. I've had it for eight years, but it only worked for *me* now.” I pounded my chest. “For *me*! On that ship full of you after you'd all done . . . done that. Let me speak for you, let me speak to them. So no more have to die.” (Okorafor, *Binti* 37)
- Pose the following questions to students after you have read this passage together:
 - What roles do technology and math play in Binti's success as a harmonizer?
 - What role does Binti's home culture play in her position as a harmonizer between Oomza Uni. and the Meduse?
- Conclude the class with a brief discussion of the following question:
 - Why is it important that Okorafor coined her own term to describe her writing? What does the term “Africanfuturism” bring to our understanding of the book that the designation “science fiction” wouldn't?

Works Cited

- Burger, Bettina. "Math and magic: Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* trilogy and its challenge to the dominance of Western science in science fiction." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2020, pp. 364-377, doi:10.1080/15295036.2020.1820540.
- Fuss, Diana, and William A. Gleason, editors. *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom*. Princeton UP, 2016.
- Okorafor, Nnedi. "Africanfuturism Defined." *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog*, Blogger, <http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html>.
- . *Binti: The Complete Trilogy*. DAW, 2020.