The Last Unicorn
By Peter S. Beagle
New York: ROC, 1991

Concept Vocabulary Analysis

Organizational Patterns
The book is organized into fourteen chapters ranging from 11-18 pages in length. It follows a linear narrative with all flashback narrated by one of the characters rather than the actual narrator. The story begins with the Unicorn overhearing two hunters discussing the disappearance of unicorns from the world. The Unicorn is troubled by their words and leaves her woods in order to find if what they say is true. On her journey, she is saved from captivity by Schmendrick, an incompetent magician who then follows her through his journey. The pair pick up a middle-aged kitchen maid, Molly Grue, following tales of the Red Bull that had heard the unicorns. After an encounter with the frightful Red Bull, Schmendrick turns the Unicorn into a human in an effort to save her life. The group makes their way to King Haggard’s castle where they discover it was he who compelled the Red Bull to capture all the unicorns and keep them in the ocean for his amusement. The members of the group take up various positions in the king’s household while trying to discover a way to free the unicorns. Through their efforts, they are able to return the Unicorn back from her human form and save the unicorns from King Haggard and the Red Bull.

Issues Related to the Study of this Literature

Themes
Identity – The Unicorn decides to leave her forest in search of the rest of the unicorns because she feels that she cannot be able to understand herself without the connection of knowing whether or not there are other unicorns left in the world. She is also faced with a dilemma of identity when Schmendrick accidentally turns her into a human woman and she begins to become confused as to which is her true self: the unicorn she once was or the Lady Amalthea she is becoming. Schmendrick and Molly Grue also have trouble with figuring out who they truly are. Schmendrick is a magician with limited control of magic and Molly Grue is a woman who has been ruined by her circumstances who still has the heart and dreams of a young girl. All of the characters need to learn about themselves and what they are capable of.

Reality – Beagle plays with the idea of what is real throughout the novel. People see the Unicorn differently in different settings, seeing what they expect to see when they look at her. There are few exceptions to the rule, notably Schmendrick and Molly Grue. The question of what is real is particularly present in Mommy Fortuna’s Midnight Carnival when the Unicorn realizes that the sad creatures kept in Mommy Fortuna’s cages are seen as mythical creatures by the paying carnival goers.

Magic – Enchantment and magic are a constant reminder that the book takes place somewhere other than the world we are used to living in. However, the magic takes on an interesting role in
that while it plays a significant role it does not seem to have specific rules to guide what it can or cannot do.

Heroism – There are several points in the novel when the issue of what makes a hero are brought up, particularly in the events surrounding Haggard’s son Lir.

Setting
The book isn’t set in a very well established world as far as fantasy novels go. Seeing as the book is more of a fairy tale/allegory for the human experience, it would make sense that the focus would not be on the land itself. From what can be told from the narrative, it seems to be set in a medieval type world that is heavily forested, although sometimes the feeling of the medieval is broken by characters doing and saying things that would make the setting seem more modern than the rest of the text would suggest.

Point of View
The story is told from a third person partially omnipotent point of view, narrating the thoughts and feelings of any character at a given time. This adds to the fairy tale feel of the novel. Take for example a portion of the first chapter. “Unicorns are immortal. It is their nature to live alone in one place: usually a forest where there is a pool clear enough for them to see themselves – for they are a little vain, knowing themselves to be the most beautiful creatures in the world, and magic besides” (1-2). Like many fairy tales, the omniscient narrator gives mythological information to add to the story.

Literary Terms

Allegory – It has been said many times that the story of The Last Unicorn is an allegory for the human condition. According to the definition on www.dictionary.com, “Allegory” is defined as “the representation of abstract ideas or principles by characters, figures, or events in narrative, dramatic, or pictorial form.”

Foreshadowing – The Unicorn’s eventual transformation is foreshadowed with several mentions of how Nikos the wizard once changed a unicorn into a human man. I think that it is important to make a note of this with students so that they can see the foreshadowing later on in the story.

Irony – The two humans that travel with the Unicorn are ironic counterpoints to what kind of companions one would normally expect to see with a unicorn. Rather than an accomplished, wise wizard and a virgin princess, we see a bumbling magician and an aging peasant woman. It would be interesting for students to be able to take a look at the
roles women play in classic fairy tales as well as Medieval literature such as “They Faerie Queen” and compare them to Molly Grue.

Simile and Metaphor – Beagle makes heavy use of both simile and metaphor, particularly the former. Most of Beagles descriptions will contain at least one simile and often times a metaphor to carry along the simile:

“The town of Hagsgate was shaped like a footprint: long toes splaying from a broad paw and ending in the dark claws of a dagger.” (81)

“The magician sank back, his face gone pale and crumpled as a washerwoman’s fingers.” (146)

**Affective Issues Related to the Work**

Students might have difficulty in relating *The Last Unicorn* to their own lives because of the foreign setting, the fairy tale genre, and the age of the characters. However, there are several issues that, if focused on, might help students to relate to the novel better.

- **Identity:** How do we figure out who we are? From what do we take our sense of self? Is our identity given to us by other people or do we have to figure it out on our own?
- **Life as a Journey:** How is life like a journey? What are the stops taken on the journey that eventually determine the destination?

**Vocabulary Issues**

Most of the words are fairly easy to understand within the context of the book. However, there are some instances where the words might be understood but the meaning missed.

Monsters: Monsters are mentioned that students might not be familiar with. Monsters such as a manticore, the Midgard Serpent, a harpy, and a satyr are said to be part of Mommy Fortuna’s Midnight Carnival (17-18).

Medieval: Some of the language Beagle uses when in his descriptions of clothing and other items might be unfamiliar to students. Students might be acquainted with words such as “jerkin,” “spire,” and “bridle” but might not clearly understand what these things are. These words should be addressed but more focus should be put on second tier words that can be seen throughout the book. Some of the vocabulary that might be looked at are “waning”(9), “fumbling”(34), “catharsis”(49), “retinue”(74), “regarded”(99), and “toll”(179).

**Background Knowledge**

Mythology: Mythology is of all sorts is referenced throughout the book. The most obvious mythology is that regarding the unicorn. There are many myths surrounding the unicorn but Beagle seems to stick mostly to the western concept of the unicorn. Students should also be
acquainted with Greek as well as Norse mythology as there are several references to myths of both of these cultures.

Fairy Tales: *The Last Unicorn* reads very much like a fairy tale taken down by the Grimm Brothers. Students should be familiar with the feel of a fairy tale narrative, how a hero functions in these works, and what types of things a fairy tale usually teaches. It would probably be a good idea to examine heroic archetypes.

**Implications for Students of Diversity**

Adolescence is the time of human physical, mental, and emotional development. As such, it is particularly important to the adolescent to attempt to figure out just “who they are.” Being a member of an ethnic, socio-economic, or religious minority does not make the student any more certain of their place in the world and might, in fact, add to the confusion. In the book, each of the main characters uses different methods to figure out who they are and what makes them who they are. The events the characters encounter in their time together help them to better understand what they are capable of and lead them to a closer grasp of their sense of self. Emphasizing the two concepts of discovering self and life as a journey will help all students in the classroom, not just students of diversity, to understand and connect with the book.

Some students might also come from a culture where they have not been introduced to the mythology that other students have come in contact with. Having a working understanding of the mythology surrounding unicorns is imperative to understanding the full meaning of the book. It would be especially important to make sure that students understand these myths – particularly the implications of innocence and purity that comes with unicorns – before delving into the book.

**Gender Issues**

Although the book addresses gender issues, it is not the main focus of the novel. The topic of gender roles can, however, be discussed at length concerning several of the characters.

The Unicorn: As both a unicorn and as the Lady Amalthea, the Unicorn is placed on a pedestal as a representation of all that is good and innocent, yet she is missing something that she does not comprehend. She is later able to understand human emotions but is no longer fully a unicorn.

Molly Grue: Molly Grue could be seen as a ruined woman. Although we are not told of her complete history, we can infer that she spent some time as the only woman in a group of thieves and performed all the duties of a wife without the title allotted by marriage and without any of the benefits that should come with that title. She is still depicted as a fairly wise figure and almost innocent in her hopes and ability to touch the Unicorn.
Schmendrick: The normal role of a wizard is turned on its head with the bumbling magician. Not only is he childlike in appearance but he is also only a vessel for magic rather than its controller, much like a woman is a vessel for the miracle of life.

Prince Lir: Lir is the stereotypical fairy tale hero until he meets Lady Amalthea. He is then set to peeling potatoes and pondering what it is he could possibly do to impress the Lady. His understanding of what it means to be a hero becomes confused and he needs to develop something else to base his masculinity on.

The Enduring Issue

*The Last Unicorn* addresses self-actualization. Who and what are we? How do we come to understand this concept? What determines how we view ourselves? The main characters go against the typical character types one might see in a myth but they still accomplish the same goals, showing that there is no inherent quality that we must have in order to accomplish something but that we determine what becomes of us. Molly Grue, given her past, should never have seen a unicorn, let alone touched, traveled with, comforted, even helped to save one. However, she *does* accomplish all these things. We too are not necessarily defined by our past but rather by what we choose to do.

Project Ideas

Jigsaw Research: When we encounter Mommy Fortuna’s Midnight Carnival, we are quickly introduced to a series of creatures taken from various mythologies. Have groups do a small research project that they will present to the other groups in order to help the class get a better idea of what these creatures look like and where they came from. The same thing can be done with subjects other than the monsters in the Midnight Carnival.

Create a World: The world of *The Last Unicorn* is fairly vague. We can understand that it is set in a fairly medieval world (although there are many non-medieval aspects introduced at times) and that there are extensive forests to be traveled through. By creating a world that the book might have taken place in, including pictures and simple maps, might help students better visualize the events taking place in the book.

Ballads: There are several instances where the characters suddenly burst into song. This is very reminiscent of Tolkien’s work. This would be a perfect opportunity to introduce students to the concept of the enduringly popular form of the ballad. Use examples from the past, from Tolkien, as well as from modern music in order to help students better understand what a ballad accomplishes. After doing that, it might be fun to let students bring in their own examples of ballads that they know from popular music. Then give them the opportunity to write their own
ballad. Have topics ready for them to choose from in order to give them a little bit of structure should they need it but otherwise leave the topics open ended so that they can write about something that interests them.

Enrichment Texts

Biographies: I find that it’s important to understand a little bit about the author’s life and works in order to fully understand a text. Here are a few places online to help introduce students to Peter S. Beagle:

- Fantasy Book Review: Short and to the point. The site gives a brief introduction to the author followed by a list of works he has written and an interview. [http://www.fantasybookreview.co.uk/Peter-S-Beagle/biography.html](http://www.fantasybookreview.co.uk/Peter-S-Beagle/biography.html)
- Unofficially Peter S. Beagle: A web site all about the author that includes a bit of a longer biography, awards, and other interesting things about Peter S. Beagle. [http://www.peterbeagle.com/index2.html](http://www.peterbeagle.com/index2.html)

Unicorns: As mentioned, it is important that students understand the connotations of innocence and purity that go along with unicorns. Here are a few places to find wonderful information and pictures about unicorns:

- Legends: This is a nicely organized web site that gives background information on Eastern and Western myths about unicorns as well as information about where they are seen in literature such as Shakespeare and the Bible. [http://www.unicorncollector.com/legends.htm](http://www.unicorncollector.com/legends.htm)
- Dragons and Unicorns: A Natural History: A “non-fiction” book by Paul and Karin Johnsgard that details the history of dragons and unicorns. Very wordy but it might be interesting to hand out selections from the book as an introduction to another type of text they might encounter.

The Movie: Yes, there is a movie and, amazingly, it sticks fairly close to the book. It is, unfortunately, very dated. It is also animated as well as a musical. If time allows, it would be fun to allow students to view (and make fun of) the movie. There are rumors going around that a live action version of the book is in the works but nothing has come of the rumor for nearly a decade and there is little evidence that the movie ever progressed beyond brainstorming.