Lesson Plan: A Writer’s Odyssey

Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Suggested Grade Level: 11–12
Estimated Reading Time: Variable
Estimated Class Time: Three to four periods

Introduction

The Renaissance period was marked by a renewed interest in the arts of Greek and Roman antiquity, including Classical stories of the exploits of gods and heroes. Homer’s ancient Greek poem The Odyssey was a familiar tale to most Greeks through oral tradition. It tells the story of Ulysses (or Odysseus), a hero of the Trojan War, as he journeys home from Troy (in modern Turkey) to his kingdom, the Greek isle of Ithaca. Although Ulysses’ travels are short in distance, he is continually delayed and set off course by the actions of gods and goddesses, some of whom do not want to see him return alive. As he is cast from adventure to adventure, Ulysses’ mettle is put to the test, but true to his heroic nature he uses his physical skills and wit to overcome disaster. At last, after 10 years at war and 10 years at sea, the hero is delivered to his native shores and to his patiently waiting wife, Penelope.

In this lesson, students examine Apollonio di Giovanni’s 15th-century painting The Adventures of Ulysses and its relationship to Homer’s 8th-century B.C. epic poem. Students also examine a modern, 20th-century representation of the same story as a means of comparing different narrative strategies in the visual and literary arts. Afterward students complete a creative-writing assignment based on Homer’s heroic adventure and produce an illustration for their story using the method of continuous narrative employed by Apollonio.

Lesson Objectives

• Critically analyze a work of literature, examining character, theme, and structure
• Critically analyze a work of art, considering different approaches to representing narrative
• Compare narrative strategies in texts and visual art
• Complete and illustrate a creative-writing assignment
Key Terms
- renaissance
- antiquity/Classical
- continuous narrative
- synoptic narrative
- monoscenic narrative
- cyclic narrative
- memory
- foreshadowing
- simile
- metaphor
- symmetry
- bard
- muse
- composition

Instructional Materials
- pencils
- notebook paper
- paper
- colored pencils
- watercolor
- brushes
- recommended websites (see below)
  - http://www.mythweb.com/odyssey/
Procedures

Discussion

• As an ongoing activity in class or for homework, have students read *The Odyssey*, in full length on the Web or in print. (You may choose to read a summary of the poem and then supplement with selections from the full text.) Allow students approximately 14 hours to read the poem, or 24 days, reading one book a day.

• As they are reading, have students list and summarize the major episodes of the poem.

• In class, discuss the major elements and narrative strategies of Homer's poem.

Elements:

• Epic poems begin with an invocation to a muse (any of the nine sister goddesses in ancient Greek mythology presiding over song, poetry, and the arts) and with a statement of an over-arching theme that recurs throughout the books. Ask students:
  o How is the muse invoked in this poem? Why?
  o What is the main theme introduced in the first few lines of the poem?

• Epic poems always have a hero and therefore focus on the human experience rather than on the actions of the gods and goddesses. Discuss the concept of the hero with students. Ask:
  o What qualities do heroes possess?
  o How is Ulysses an example of a hero?

• Throughout, epic poetry relies on simile and metaphor to reinforce themes. Ask student to identify some of the common similes and metaphors that recur throughout the books.

Narrative Structure:

• Epic poems generally begin in media res (in the middle of things) so that the story revolves around memory and foreshadowing. Epic poems also generally employ regular patterns and symmetrical episodes to reinforce themes, hold the reader’s attention, and, in the oral tradition, remind the bard (the storyteller) of his place in the story.

• Have students return to the lists and summaries they created while reading. Ask them to rearrange the order of their lists and summaries to reflect the actual chronology of Ulysses’ adventures. Note differences between the written and actual sequence of events. Ask:
o What are the major episodes of Ulysses’ journey between Troy and Ithaca? (There are about 14.)

o Can you locate the major turning point in Ulysses’ journey? (Ulysses visits the underworld.) What happens during this episode? What effect does this event have on the characters/direction of the story?

o Think about the all the major episodes before and after this turning point. What crucial decisions were made by Ulysses and his men in each episode?

o Can you pick out one defining theme that recurs throughout the poem? Sub-themes?

o Can you find patterns and/or symmetry in the narrative structure of the episodes? (Teachers see chart below)

• Show students Apollonio di Giovanni’s The Adventures of Ulysses. Explain that the work is a 15th-century Renaissance representation of Homer’s ancient Greek poem.

• Briefly discuss the Renaissance interest in Classical literature and art. Note that artists and philosophers in the Renaissance were particularly interested in the humanist emphasis (emphasizing man’s individual achievement) in heroic epic poetry.

• Mention that although the story comes from ancient Greece, the painter included elements that are culturally specific to 15th-century Italy (for example, the clothes and hats of the characters, the architecture, the ships)

• Have students consider the painting’s narrative in relation to Homer’s text. Ask:
  o What episodes does the artist include? Exclude?
  o Does his representation change the story? The major themes?
  o Is a sense of symmetry and pattern maintained in Apollonio’s painting?

• When portraying a story, artists employ various narrative structures, including monoscopic, synoptic, cyclic, and continuous. Discuss the differences with students. Ask:
  o What do you think are challenges artists face when illustrating narrative texts?
  o What kind of narrative structure is employed in Apollonio’s painting? (continuous narrative)
  o Why do you think the artist chose to use this kind of narrative? (This has much to do with the shape of the object on which the image was painted, which was long and narrow. It was also a way for the artist to include a great amount of detail and express that Ulysses' journey takes place across time rather than in a single moment.)
• Is this an effective method for illustrating the story? Can you imagine another way (traditional or contemporary) of representing the text that might convey the theme/characters/information/action as well or more effectively?

• Have students compare Homer’s text and Apollonio’s painting to another image of the story, Romare Bearden’s *The Return of Odysseus* (Homage to Pintoricchio and Benin). Ask:
  
  o What is depicted?
  
  o What type of narrative strategy is employed? (synoptic)
  
  o Is this an effective method of illustrating the text? What is gained/lost through employing this type of narrative structure? Which painting do you think more effectively conveys the action, characters, mood, and setting of Homer’s ancient epic poem? Why?

**Activity**

• Using the themes and narrative structure of Homer’s *Odyssey*, have students write their own epic adventures. Provide students with the choice to write a series of short poems or discrete episodes in short-story format (5–10).

• Encourage students to base their adventures on one or two of the major themes of the epic poem (e.g. memory and reunion, reversal and progress, survival and death) and require them to include the following elements in their narratives:
  
  o a hero/heroine who displays the heroic characteristics discussed earlier.
  
  o a beginning *in media res*
  
  o memory and foreshadowing
  
  o a turning point in the action
  
  o repeated themes, and evidence of pattern and symmetry in the structure of episodes

• Have students use colored pencils and/or watercolor to illustrate their short stories or poems using the narrative method of their choice, either the continuous narrative method used by Apollonio or the synoptic method used by Bearden. Encourage students to consider first:
  
  o How will you convey the mood, action, characters, and setting of your story?
  
  o Which episodes are crucial to your illustration?
  
  o Will you choose the continuous or synoptic method?
Evaluation

• Have students present their illustrated stories to the class. Discuss the recurring themes in students’ stories, the narrative structure they have chosen, and the patterns, and symmetry they have employed.

• Base students’ evaluations on their ability to analyze a text, describe a work of art, compare structural and thematic elements of visual arts and literature, participate in class, write creatively, and present clearly to the class.

Glossary

antiquity \( (n) \)
ancient times between 1200 B.C. and 400 A.D.; the period preceding the Middle Ages

composition \( (n) \)
the arrangement of elements such as shape, space, and color in a work of art

continuous narrative \( (n) \)
in art, an episodic representation of a story in which a certain character or characters appear in every scene, and there are no borders separating one episode from the next

Renaissance \( (n) \)
the French word renaissance, meaning "rebirth." In 15th- and 16th-century Europe, the revival of learning, literature, art, and architecture emphasized and often imitated Classical examples from ancient Greece and Rome. Although the Renaissance was initially centered in Italy, aspects of Renaissance culture also appeared in Northern Europe (particularly Flanders, the Netherlands, and Germany), especially during the 16th century.

Trojan War \( (n) \)
12th- or 13th-century B.C. war between the Trojans and Greeks; the conflict was brought about by the abduction of Helen, wife of the Greek king Menelaos, by Paris, a Trojan prince
**Chart: Narrative Structure of Homer’s *Odyssey***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Event/Condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Cicones</td>
<td>Battle—beginning of journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Lotus-Eaters</td>
<td>Loss of memory/desire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Cyclops</td>
<td>Cannibalism—loss of humanity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Aeolus</td>
<td>Mutiny—storm/wrath of god</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Laestregonians</td>
<td>Cannibalism—loss of humanity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Circe</td>
<td>Controlling female/entrapment</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Underworld</td>
<td>Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Circe</td>
<td>Helpful female/release</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Sirens</td>
<td>Loss of memory/desire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Skylla and Charybdis</td>
<td>Loss of humanity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Helios</td>
<td>Mutiny—wrath of god—loss of humanity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Calypso</td>
<td>Controlling female/entrapment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Nausicaa/Phaecians</td>
<td>Helpful female/release—feast/end of journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Ithaca</td>
<td>Battle—reunion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: [http://www.temple.edu/classics/odysseyho.html](http://www.temple.edu/classics/odysseyho.html)*

**Illinois Learning Standards**

Language Arts: 1–4  
Fine Arts: 27