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English 112B

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### Unit of Study: Fantastic Journeys

#### **Introduction: Why Teach Fantasy?**

Too often the genre of fantasy is seen as a guilty pleasure for adults, or a phase that young adults grow out of. It is a genre isn't considered as legitimate as contemporary realistic fiction; it's what nerds read. It's escapism and has no practical value in the real world. Nothing could be more untrue. What is at the core of fantasy is the journey. The trappings may be different, but the story of the hero's journey is a thread that runs through all stories, fantastic and otherwise. Fantasy just provides a glimpse into journeys that we could not otherwise take.

This is the rationale for teaching fantasy. Using Joseph Campbell's monomyth as a guide, students will learn to trace the hero's journey. By introducing it with something familiar and then using it as a guide to *The Odyssey* by Homer, they can not only apply it to other works of literature, including young adult fantasy, but any narrative. By seeing how it applies to the lives of other fictional young adults and beyond, students will come to see that the monomyth is connected to their own story and personal odyssey. Since *The Odyssey* is taught to 9th and 12th graders, this is especially relevant. They are either beginning their voyage through high school, or preparing to start a journey that will last for the rest of their lives: adulthood.

This unit of study, while based in fantasy, will occasionally stray from it. This is intentional. One of the points of this unit of study is to show that there is practical value to

studying the fantasy genre, because the journeys so often found in fantasy stories are really found everywhere there are heroes and journeys. They are universal.

### **Before the Unit: Greek Mythology Primer**

Before beginning the unit, I would do an activity to review the Greek pantheon for students who are already familiar with the mythology and give a quick introduction to those who are not. This would serve the dual purpose of making sure all the students started the unit with the same knowledge base and exposing them to archetypes for the first time in each unit.

I would present the Greek pantheon and their attributes to the class, but instead of using images of them from art, I would choose a personal or fictional character students would be familiar with to represent them. For example, Henry VIII for Zeus slide or Regina George from *Mean Girls* for Aphrodite. For students unfamiliar with the Greek pantheon, they will get a better grip of what each god is like by defining them with something familiar. For students who have learned about the Greek pantheon, they will see that their echoes still resound through Western culture.

Either way, the idea that stories and archetypes like these are universal will take root. This is the second reason for this exercise, and the one that will extend through the readings to come and beyond. Students will start the unit already exposed to the idea that archetypes are universal and have been handed down from the past to the modern day.

### **Launching the Unit: The Hero's Journey**

To launch the unit, I would introduce students to the concept of the Hero's Journey by applying it to a story they are more than likely already familiar with: J.J. Abrams's 2009 *Star Trek* film. I intentionally chose something not a part of the fantasy genre (in this case, science fiction), to highlight the universality of myth and archetype in storytelling.

I would pass out the worksheet detailing The Hero's Journey ("Monomyth Handout") before giving my Powerpoint presentation on the version of The Hero's Journey that Jim Kirk takes through the movie. The presentation itself is not meant to be completely comprehensive; students will be encouraged to fill in the blanks that the Powerpoint did not cover with their own suggestions.

This activity also takes the concept of archetypes that have been handed down from the past to the present, and move them into the futuristic world of *Star Trek*. This will continue to hammer home the relevance of studying myths and the archetypes that they contain.

### **Centerpiece Work: The Odyssey**

The canonical centerpiece work for this unit is Homer's *Odyssey* because it is the canonical work most referenced and alluded to in terms of journeys. This unit's approach to fantasy is to reveal the universality of the genre, and few works are as universally known as *The Odyssey*. Odysseus's journey is not merely one that takes him through the fantastic perils of the world around him. Odysseus also goes on an inner journey, growing from a clever but arrogant hero to a wiser, humbler (but still clever!) man over the course of the text. Going home for Odysseus is not a question of how far he has to journey over land and sea, but how far he must come as a man.

Odysseus's journey of seeing the world while growing as a person is not the only one in *The Odyssey*. His son Telemachus also goes on his own personal odyssey, and it is one that young adults can identify with. Nor is the text entirely dominated by the masculine; Penelope may not leave Ithaca, but she mirrors her husband Odysseus and has her own vital role to play in the story (Sisti).

Students will read *The Odyssey* together as a class over several periods. This is to make sure they comprehend the text, which they may not be able to do if sent home to read and tackle it alone. To keep things from getting stale, I would approach this several ways. A good start would be to “read aloud Book I or play a tape recording of the chapter as students follow along. Other chapters are read aloud in a reader’s theater fashion... Students may also read aloud ‘round robin’ style’ within established small groups” (Erickson 5) Students will receive another copy of the worksheet (“Monomyth Handout”) used during the *Star Trek* exercise during the reading of *The Odyssey*, and be asked to fill it out as their reading progresses.

At the beginning of each class period, students will have ten minutes of journaling time. Daily topics will vary: some will address the text directly to be sure that students are keeping up and understanding the text, while other prompts will ask students to take what they have learned by applying it to other media (ie: What other trickster heroes can you name?) or their own lives (ie: Write about the last time you were homesick.). Keeping a good mix of topics will keep the students connected to the text and the greater pedagogical goal of understanding the universality of myths and archetypes.

While students use the Monomyth Handout to track Odysseus’s Hero’s Journey over the course of the reading, Telemachus and Penelope will each have a class period where the focus will be on them. On Penelope’s day, the class will delve into what goes into the archetype of the trickster hero. Not only does Penelope mirror her husband by using cunning schemes to keep the suitors at bay, but her greatest triumph is against Odysseus himself:

The final display of Penelope's cunning was her test to verify Odysseus was who he claimed to be. All it consisted of was one subtle remark: "Come, Eurycleia, / move the sturdy bedstead out of our bridal chamber-" (23.197-98). This is a stroke

of brilliance. The true Odysseus would know that the bed couldn't be moved by any mortal. What makes the test foolproof is that only three people had ever seen the inside of the bridal chamber, husband, wife, and a single servant. An important moment in the scene is when, right after Penelope asks Euryclea to move the bed, Odysseus remarks "Woman -- your words, they cut me to the core!" (23.205). Here, for the first and only time in the poem, the great warrior is not manipulating the emotions of the other person in the conversation, he is at the mercy of his wife's words and actions. It's important to note that the only mortal that can put Odysseus into such a state is none other than his cunning wife. These actions show the queen's astute personality. It's only fitting that the Matchless Queen of Cunning be wed to the "soul of cunning" (24.184). (Sisti)

This moment cements Penelope as Odysseus's equal, and so it is a vital point to highlight in a text that is predominantly male. Trickster figures are often male as well, but as the activity in Expanding the Unit on *The Golden Compass* will show, this does not have to be the case. For the day's activity, I created a worksheet using Crawford's qualities of a Trickster Hero (Crawford 8). Using evidence from the text, students will fill out a table with both Penelope and Odysseus's trickster qualities based on definitions adapted from Crawford.

On the class period devoted to Telemachus, I would break the students up into discussion groups, assigning them topics adapted from a similar activity in "Heroes and Journeys in *The Odyssey* and Several Works of Young Adult Literature". The Journeys Group would chart Telemachus's path on a map and discuss what he learned on each step of the journey. The Father-Son Relationships Group would list other other father-son relationships in *The Odyssey* and compare and contrast them to Odysseus and Telemachus. The Growing Up group would

trace Telemachus's growth from unsure boy to a grown man fighting by his brother's side. (Ericson 6-7) After discussing within their groups, students would then be asked to share their findings with the rest of the class.

### **Expanding the Unit:**

Since the students will be reading *The Odyssey* in class, they will be allowed to choose a young adult fantasy work to focus on during their own time and connect it to the class's reading of *The Odyssey*. For all these expansions upon the unit, students will be put into groups based on the work they chose and asked to create a presentation based on some aspect of the work to share with the class so that all students can be exposed to many works of young adult fantasy. Since *The Odyssey* can be taught to both 9th graders and 12th graders, I'm including texts for both age groups so that this unit of study can be more versatile and useful to me in the future.

My first pick for younger students to extend this unit is Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series. The series begins with *The Lightning Thief*:

*The Lightning Thief* is a light-hearted fantasy about a modern 12-year-old boy who learns that his true father is Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea. Percy sets out to become a hero by undertaking a quest across the United States to find the entrance to the Underworld and stop a war between the gods. The novel provides a high-interest, humorous introduction to the Greek myths...

The novel offers an excellent chance for students to explore the Classical heritage of Greece as it applies to modern civilization; to analyze the elements of the hero's quest rendered in a modern-day story with a first-person narrator to whom students can easily relate; and to discuss such relevant issues as learning

disabilities, the nature of family, and themes of loyalty, friendship and faith.  
 (“Rationale”)

Students who choose the *Percy Jackson* series would be put into groups with an assigned focus on the text. One group would use what they learned from the unit about The Hero’s Journey and map out Percy’s version. Another group would find the references to *The Odyssey* in the *Percy Jackson* series and present those modern day counterparts to the class. (ie: The Lotus Casino = The Island of the Lotus Eaters). Both these groups would build on the previously described activities from the class’s reading of *The Odyssey*.

Two books from C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* match up well with *The Odyssey: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. For the group that chooses the first book of the series, one character is the obvious choice to focus a Hero’s Journey presentation on:

All of the Narnia stories feature children as protagonists, but Lewis seemed to have favored Lucy Pevensie... in the first three books of the series Lucy is the viewpoint character more often than not. Lucy also seems to have an especially close bond with Aslan. Most importantly, it is Lucy who discovers the wardrobe and the land beyond it, so in a sense, at least *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is Lucy’s story. (Emerson 137)

Lucy’s story (mostly) comes to an close in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, but what students in the group focusing on that book would be guided towards is a study of the perils to be found as the ship sails into the utter East, visiting exotic and at times dangerous islands along the way. Students can map the journey of the ship, the perils and lessons learned by Caspian, the

Pevensies, and Eustace, and then compare them to the lands that Odysseus and his crew visit and their adventures (and misadventures!) along the way.

For 12th graders, *A Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula K. LeGuin is a great bridge to *The Odyssey*. Ged's journey of self-discovery across the oceans of Earthsea has parallels to those of both Odysseus and Telemachus. Students can take what they learned during the Telemachus discussion day and create a map of Ged's journeys across Earthsea, with details about what he learns, when he learns it, and where. Ged's path goes right down Joseph Campbell's roadmap, so the Earthsea group may also choose to use the Monomyth Handout to create a powerpoint detailing the steps Ged takes on The Hero's Journey.

For students more interested in delving into aspects of the Trickster Hero, Phillip Pullman's *The Golden Compass* is right up their alley. Lyra Belacqua, the protagonist, may only be twelve, but the subject matter of the series is mature (and controversial!) enough to sate the tastes of older readers. Lyra is the hero of the story: her call to adventure and the Golden Compass, her talisman, leads her on a journey of personal growth across her world and beyond. Students presenting the novel may choose to go the route of presenting her Hero's Journey. However, she is also a Trickster Hero in the vein of both Odysseus and Penelope, so students may adapt the earlier activity defining the trickster hero and present that to the class instead.

### **Summing Up:**

By now, the Hero's Journey should be a path well known to the students, and so to close the unit I would have the class watch *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, while filling out the accompanying worksheet from Hamby. ("*O Brother, Where Art Thou* Worksheet"). Using this, the resources on archetypes that the class has studied in reading *The Odyssey*, and the knowledge gained from the group presentations on young adult fantasy, the students would then be ready for



their final project: writing the story of their own journey one of the following prompts. The first comes from *Adolescent Literature as a Compliment to the Classics*:

What odysseys or journeys in your own life have you experienced? What odysseys do you anticipate making in the future? Think about as many details of these journeys as you can. In an autobiographical essay, describe a personal odyssey. If you choose to write about a past journey, be sure to tell your goals, the obstacles you encountered, and the qualities you needed on this journey. (Ericson 16)

As a second option for more creatively inclined students, they may take the prompt and put a fantasy spin on it, writing their personal journey in the style of *The Odyssey*. Both freshmen and seniors are facing a journey into the unknown. For freshmen, navigating high school can be like sailing in between Scylla and Charybdis. Much like Telemachus, seniors are facing their coming of age into adulthood and preparing to set off for college or a career.

This is why studying myth from the universal perspective of The Hero's Journey is so vital for both of these age groups. It's more than just a tool they can use to analyze narratives, it's a way to look at our own personal histories. By extension, fantasy is not an escape; it is a way to walk in someone else's shoes, learn lessons alongside them, and then apply them to the reality of our own lives.

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### Trickster Hero Qualities

**Deceitful:** The trickster uses trickery to bring about the change that they are targeting.

**Self Serving:** The trickster often feels that they have been wronged and feels justified in taking any actions they deems necessary to bring about change and defeat the enemy.

**Cultural Hero:** The trickster may be idealized as a cultural hero when, as the agent of transformation, he overturns a cruel or unfair leader or political/social system or reverses the fortunes of the more powerful party.

**Shape Shifter:** The trickster may change forms as an element of surprise to their target. The change may also be psychological instead of (or in addition to) a visual change.

**Solitary Creature:** Many tricksters are solitary animals (or humans), working alone rather than with a partner or within a group – to undertake change.

**Physically Weak Creature:** The trickster is often portrayed as a much weaker character than their enemies, and yet through cleverness and trickery, he is able to overcome all obstacles and prevail. In some cases the trickster may appear to be weaker physically in order to confuse their prey.

**Special Tools:** The trickster may have special tools or abilities that enable him to perform his acts. Often these tools include magic and/or supernatural powers.

**Teacher:** The trickster is a purveyor of life lessons through the story.

Adapted by Elizabeth Barcelos from “There is No Box: The Trickster In Literature” by Margaret Crawford

### Odysseus vs. Penelope: Trickster Heroes

Odysseus is considered one of the greatest tricksters in literature. But what about his wife, Penelope? Using what you have learned from *The Odyssey*, take the terms from the Trickster Hero Qualities handout and match them to their character. Please list examples from the text.

Odysseus	Penelope



## Kirk's Odyssey: The Hero's Journey

# Departure

## Call to Adventure:

Admiral Pike invites Kirk to join Starfleet.

## Refusal of the Call:

But Kirk refuses...

## Accepting the Call:

...only to change his mind after the bar fight and go to the spaceport the next morning.



# Departure

Guide/Mentor:  
Captain Pike



Talisman:  
The Enterprise





# Departure:

Companions:  
The Enterprise Crew



Threshold Guardian:  
Spock & Kobayashi Maru



# Initiation

Brother Battle:  
Spock



Night Journey/  
Abduction:

Kirk is kicked off of  
the Enterprise

# Initiation

## Dragon Battle: Monster on Delta Vega



# Initiation

Sacred Marriage:  
Alternate Spock



Ultimate Boon:  
Scotty and Transwarp  
Beaming



# Initiation

Belly of the Whale: Nero and the Narada



# Initiation

Apotheosis & Recognition by the Father:  
Kirk lives up to his father's legacy and is  
commended by  
Starfleet



# The Return

Pursuit: Fleeing the Red Matter black hole



# The Return

Master of Two Worlds & Freedom to Live:  
Kirk is now Captain of the Enterprise!





## Works Consulted:

Palumbo, Donald. "The Monomyth in *Star Trek* (2009): Kirk & Spock Together Again for the First Time."

Screencaps from J.J. Abrams' 2009 *Star Trek* courtesy of [screenmusings.org/StarTrek](http://screenmusings.org/StarTrek)

I. DEPARTURE	
<b>Call to Adventure:</b> How does the character receive the call to adventure?	
<b>Refusal of the Call:</b> Does the character accept the call immediately?	
<b>Answering the Call:</b> What motivates the character to accept the call?	
<b>Supernatural Aid:</b> Who or what helps the hero on his journey? Why?	
<b>Guide/Mentor:</b> Is there a specific character that helps the hero understand the life situation or provides the hero with special training?	
<b>Talisman:</b> Is there a particular item that has special significance to the hero?	
<b>Companions:</b> Who is with the hero on his journey? How do these companions help the hero face the challenges?	
<b>Crossing the Threshold:</b> At what point in the story does the hero leave the familiar world and move into a new, unfamiliar world?	
<b>Threshold Guardians:</b> Are there characters that try to prevent the hero from crossing over into the unfamiliar territory or circumstance?	
II: INITIATION	
<b>Road of Trials:</b> What specific challenges does the hero face?	
<b>Brother Battle:</b> Does the hero battle physically or mentally with someone who is a relative or a close friend?	
<b>Meeting the Goddess:</b> Does the hero meet with a character with special beauty and power?	
<b>Abduction:</b> Is the character kidnapped, or is someone close to the hero kidnapped?	

<b>Night or Sea Journey:</b> Where do the hero's travels take him?	
<b>Dragon Battle:</b> Does the hero battle some kind of monster? Does the hero face an inner-demon?	
<b>Ritual Death or Dismemberment:</b> Is the hero injured and thought to be dead? Does the hero mistakenly believe someone close to him is dead? Does the hero suffer an injury in which he loses a limb or use of some other body part?	
<b>Sacred Marriage:</b> Does the hero have a special emotional bond? (It could literally be a marriage with another character.)	
<b>Atonement ("at one with") with or Recognition by the Father:</b> Is the hero reunited with his father in some way?	
<b>Entering the Belly of the Whale:</b> Is there some point in the story where the hero must face his deepest fear or the darkest evil in the story?	
<b>Apotheosis (Deification):</b> Is there a point in the story where the hero is held up as an ideal or where the hero is worshipped as a god?	
<b>Ultimate Boon/Magic Elixir:</b> Does the hero find some special solution to the problem he is attempting to resolve? This might be a magic potion or a key to something.	
<b>III. THE RETURN</b>	
<b>Refusal of the Return:</b> Does the hero initially refuse to return to the homeland or the place that he began the journey?	
<b>Magic Flight/Pursuit:</b> Is there some point (generally toward the end) where the hero is being chased or is otherwise trying to escape something?	

<p><b>Rescue from Without:</b> Is there some point in the story when all seems hopeless, when it looks like the hero is going to die then suddenly he is rescued unexpectedly?</p>	
<p><b>Crossing the Return Threshold:</b> Is there some point where the hero clearly returns "home"?</p>	
<p><b>Master of Two Worlds:</b> Does it appear that the hero has conquered life in both the familiar and unfamiliar worlds?</p>	
<p><b>Freedom to Live:</b> Since the hero typically begins the journey to resolve a problem, does it appear the problem is at last resolved so that all can live freely?</p>	



**THE ODYSSEY BY HOMER**

1. Odysseus is journeying to reach his home
2. Facing the Cyclops
3. Tempted by the Sirens
4. The madness of Ajax
5. Slaughtering the Cattle of Helios
6. Consulting Tiresias the blind prophet
7. Journey to the Underworld
8. Odysseus' wife, Penelope
9. Odysseus' son, Telemachus
10. Group of suitors for Penelope's hand
11. Odysseus proves his identity
12. Land of the Lotus-Eaters
13. Odysseus tormented by Poseidon
14. The Meaning of Odysseus: Sorrow
15. Odysseus' men transformed into pigs
16. Name: Odysseus (Ulysses)
17. Name: Menelaus
18. Name: Homer
19. Odysseus' pride
20. Odysseus' gift for verbal trickery
21. Foolishness of Odysseus' comrades



**O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?**

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