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Engl 112B

26 November 2018

Unit of Study – The Hero’s Journey and *The Odyssey*

**Rationale:**

One of the things I felt deprived of as a high school student was the inherent fun that comes with reading. The joy of being immersed in a story is sucked away when a greater importance is placed on memorizing plots or stressing about getting a good grade on an analysis essay rather than reflecting on personal connections. These personal connections maximize the enjoyment thus leading to better understanding of these stories. As such, the Hero’s Journey and elements of adventure stories are core features of an exciting plot that reaches beyond written literature. *The Odyssey* by Homer is a clear example of the Hero’s Journey, and despite its complicated writing, it is, in its essence, a thrilling adventure. It exhibits multiple Exeter qualities, including having an exciting plot, imaginative language, and greater themes that not only pertain to a wider world but also have lessons to be learned. My goal with this unit of study is to make this epic poem more approachable for young students and to teach them that school assigned readings do not have to be intimidating nor boring.

**Introducing the Unit:**

This unit of study is meant for a class of high school students around the Freshman level. Before reading *The Odyssey* as a class, I would introduce the concept of the Hero’s Journey to the class, both by defining it and by providing examples. These examples include other pieces of literature, such as YA novels, and films, such as *Star Wars*. Defining the Hero’s Journey will also include using visuals through PowerPoint presentations and class discussions to allow students to provide their own examples. Besides defining the Hero’s Journey, I would also define and discuss other literary elements and terms the class will encounter while reading *The Odyssey*. These elements and terms include: protagonist, antagonist, conflict (internal and external), irony, allusion, etc.

After working with these terms, I would briefly go over the events of *The Iliad* through a PowerPoint presentation with summary and visuals to provide the students some background. This background would be very concise as I would like to spend as much time as possible with *The Odyssey*, and I would not test the students on the information they receive about *The Iliad*.

Once finished with the background information, I would move the class into reading *The Odyssey*. I would share with the class a short clip of the opening of the 80s cartoon *Ulysses 31* to work as both a fun introduction and show how far reaching the story of *The Odyssey* is. During the first class, I would read aloud with the students to give them a sense of the type of literature they will be working with for the next few weeks. I would assign the students two to three Books for reading as well as four to five questions for each “section” we would be working with. To make sure the students are doing the readings, the questions would include comprehensive questions, such as “How does Odysseus trick the cyclops, Polyphemus, to escape the cave?” Some questions will also be reflective questions, such as “What are characteristics of heroes? Does Odysseus fit these characteristics?” I would display these questions and lead either class wide discussions or allow the students to get into groups of three to four to discuss these questions.

Over the course of the unit, I would assign two major assignments regarding *The Odyssey*. One would be a simpler, creative assignment where the students will write a one to two page narrative from the perspective of any character from *The Odyssey* besides Odysseus. This assignment is meant to play with the concept of protagonists and the construction of heroes, as well as allow the students to have fun with the characters. The other assignment would be a larger group project that the students will work on for a few weeks at the end of the unit. The assignment would consist of the students getting into groups of two to three and creating a creative method of teaching one part of *The Odyssey* as though they were teaching sixth graders. The groups would have to not only figure out a teaching method but also incorporate multiple learning preferences, so simply creating a PowerPoint and summarizing the story will not be effective. The groups will also write an essay together to explain their teaching method: why they chose their method, how they simplified *The Odyssey* for younger learners, and any complications that came with creating their teaching method. Finally, the groups will present their teaching methods to the class. They will not have to perform their teaching method but rather explain their rationale to the class and explain why they believe their teaching method would be effective.

**YA Books:**

* *The Hobbit* by J.R.R Tolkien
  + *The Hobbit* follows an unlikely hero, Bilbo Baggins, and hobbit who is convinced by his friend, Gandalf, to join a group of dwarves to reclaim the treasure of Lonely Mountain. A classic example of the Hero’s Journey, *The Hobbit* is a fun and adventurous tale of heroism and courage.
* *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang
  + Told in three parts, *American Born Chinese* is an intertwined story that follows three seemingly separate characters, Jin Wang, Danny, and Sun Wukong, otherwise known as the legendary Monkey King. This graphic novel works as a different telling of the Hero’s Journey by placing more emphasis on what it means to be a hero.
* *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L’Engle
  + This science-fiction tale follows Meg Murry, along with her younger brother Charles Wallace and friend Calvin, as the trio embarks on a multi-dimensional quest to save Meg and Charles Wallace’s father. It follows the typical Hero’s Journey formula while simultaneously working as an interesting and rather educational introduction to science fiction for readers who may be new to the genre.
* *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline
  + *Ready Player One* is a newer novel that combines both the worlds of literature and video games into one grand adventure. Set in a dystopia, the main character, Wade Watts, spends his time, like most of the population, within a virtual world. But once he discovers the first clue in a treasure hunt for the greatest fortune of this virtual world, he is thrown into a worldwide race for this treasure. This novel is another fast-paced, exciting example of the Hero’s Journey in a more contemporary setting.
* *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho
  + Another classic example of a Hero’s Journey, *The Alchemist* tells the story of a shepherd boy named Santiago who receives a prophecy that says he will find a great treasure. Thus begins his Hero’s Journey where he encounters many different people and ultimately learns more about himself.
* *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel
  + A dramatic story of survival and strength, *Life of Pi* is about Piscine “Pi” Patel who survives a shipwreck only to find himself adrift in a lifeboat with a tiger as his only companion. This novel works as an unusual example of the Hero’s Journey because the journey does not have a major villain or terrifying dragon, instead the conflict lies with Pi’s survival and his mental strength.
* *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins
  + This popular dystopian novel focuses on Katniss Everdeen and her decision to join in the country’s cruel annual Hunger Games where multiple children are pitted against each other in a free-for-all battle for survival. Another dystopian Hero’s Journey, *The Hunger Games* is a dark take on the archetype that again asks the question: what makes a hero?