Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2017 Volume I: Adapting Literature

Anime and the Art of Storytelling

Curriculum Unit 17.01.03
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Introduction

This unit explores the genres of Japanese animations (hereafter named "anime") and epic poetry with students in 11th grade English classes. I first became interested in including anime in my instruction when I saw how many students read manga during in-class pleasure reading sessions, and how often their conversations would focus on both their manga and the anime adaptations. It was particularly interesting that these conversations often created common ground across student social boundaries: students who ordinarily didn't talk to each other might easily hold a conversation about anime. When I selected an anime movie to study along with a text, students I never imagined would be interested in anime would shout for joy when they heard the title. This is a genre that has a lot of traction with students, and it deserves a closer look.

Just as teachers are always looking for ways to engage students with a literary text, we are also looking for texts that already hold intrinsic interest for students. This unit pairs anime, something with a high level of student-interest, with Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey* – something with high literary merit but little initial student buy-in. I believe anime can be highly useful as a springboard for cultivating and refining both analytical skills and interpretive approaches, and these approaches can then be applied to *The Odyssey* . Hopefully, this dialogue between texts will expose the literary merits of anime while giving students an interest in and engagement with Homer's epic poem. This is a large undertaking — even abbreviating the original text of *The Odyssey* to select only the most relevant and necessary books — so the time allotted for the unit would be one marking period, consisting of 9 weeks and roughly 21 classes.

Unit Overview

The overall unit focus is the genre of Epic Fiction. It examines fiction that "raises the stakes," and explores the human experience and behavior when pressed into almost impossibly difficult situations. The epic narrative focuses on a hero, one with generally remarkable characteristics but at least one trait that is almost superhuman. Sometimes this is pure strength, but more often the epic hero has a subtle defining quality. Odysseus of course was known for his intelligence. In the anime *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* , Edward

Elric has unrelenting determination to achieve his goals. *Attack on Titan* 's main character, Eren Yeager, shares this determination but it's coupled with a will to violence that complicates his ambitions. *Evangelion* 's Shinji is crippled with self-doubt, making every action a heroic act of self-trust. True to form, these heroic qualities also betray the characters as their fatal flaws, and just as Odysseus must struggle from pride to self-actualization, so to do his anime counterparts.

The relationship between the texts will work with Homer's *The Odyssey* as a constraining text and numerous anime will combine with this narrative to show how the epic story can take a variety of forms. The idea is to present a classic story and then ask the questions, "How is this story told in different ways?" and "How does the medium affect the way this story is both told and received?" This process ideally shows students that a story thousands of years old still has power to speak to us in the present, while at the same time it makes the converse point that the stories that so easily command our attention now share common elements with how we've been telling stories for centuries. There should be the double-effect of creating buy-in for a very distant text while at the same time helping students pay closer attention and spend more time thinking about what they're watching now.

Content Objectives

There are four primary objectives for this curricular unit:

- Knowledge of narrative form and how it works
- What "epic" means and how the form works
- The media of poetry and anime
- Engaging students to create, inspired by these forms

First and foremost, it's important that students know what a story is and how it works, so the elements of fiction and a correct understanding of them are a high priority for this unit. Students should be able to break a story down into its essential elements and understand how they work together to create meaning. The first objective then is to set up the students' ability to analyze stories by reviewing (or teaching for the first time – often students only think they understand these terms when in fact they struggle even to define what a story is) the narrative elements of point of view, setting, character, protagonist, exposition, conflict, plot, crisis, and resolution. Then within these elements it's important to focus on a clear understanding of point of view (since we will study the implications of medium on point of view), a more nuanced understanding of conflict (as the interaction of opposing forces rather than a "vs" equation), and an understanding of the "climax" as the conflict's crisis (the point where the plot forces an engagement with and resolution to the conflict). These three elements of analysis will be a constant springboard into interpretations of the variety of texts we study.

The main quality of these texts is their epic nature, and it's important that students learn not only what it means for these stories to be epic, but also how "epic" works in different scales. *The Odyssey* as a constraining text and the anime that accompany it are more often than not both foreign and fantastic. It will be important for students to be able to relate to the core theme and see the epic in their lives as well. The unit will challenge students constantly to ask the question: if an epic narrative is extraordinary, majestic, impressive, and grand in scope, where might we see the epic around us where we don't expect?

If the first two objectives focus on content, the third objective draws students' attention to the medium that conveys it. This unit will expose students to epic poetry and anime that present the same ideas in different ways, creating different experiences for the reader, since viewing anime should be treated as "reading a visual text." By the end of the unit students should be comfortable with these flexible ways of reading, understanding key aspects of the forms, knowing how they're put together and what to look for when analyzing them. Hopefully a knowledge of the working of epic poetry will make it more accessible and appealing to the students, and a knowledge of the mechanics of anime will disengage students enough to take a look at how it creates the experience they tend to enjoy so much.

Lastly, the unit aims to encourage students to engage with the epic and the anime genre through writing. They'll be writing about what they see and think informally over the course of the unit, but it would be interesting to see what happens when students who have in-depth knowledge make their own connections. Part of the reason this unit exists is the already present background knowledge of the students; so it would be a shame to waste the opportunity to capitalize on that. With this in mind the unit will build up to a major project that gives students freedom to choose how they will meet it. Students will either review anime, create anime (in the form of a storyboard), or connect anime to their own life. In class sessions we will be making the connections explicit between anime and *The Odyssey* , and their informal writings will address their understanding of this, but the objective of the major composition assignment is to extend their knowledge beyond the borders of the course of study.

Teaching Strategies

Overview

The nature of students' first encounter with the unit will condition the rest of their experience of it. With that in mind the unit begins with the concept that runs through all text and media: the nature of the epic experience. This concept ties everything together, and it's what they should be thinking about no matter what they encounter. After establishing the concept, students begin to examine both *The Odyssey* and a supplementary anime text to view the epic idea in context. Once the students have a level of understanding (and ideally some personal investment) a serious examination of the story of *The Odyssey* begins. As the students work through the story they must consider each of the narrative elements and what is going on with them. Once they are confident in performing consistent narrative analyses they will look at anime texts – selected scenes, entire television episodes, or feature-length movies – paired with *The Odyssey* . The focus of narrative analysis will shift to point of view and cultivate an awareness of how the different media convey similar ideas. As they get further into the study of both genres they'll begin to work on their culminating writing composition, leading to a presentation of their writing that combines both written and visual elements.

Process

The unit starts with a student-directed exploration on the meaning of "epic." Without recourse to a dictionary, they should work together to determine and record a class definition. Epic stories pit extraordinary (but flawed) characters against extraordinary situations, and conversations around this term can focus on real-life or fictional narratives. Students can even look to their own lives and the stories they hear and tell to find the qualities that elevate a story above others. They can imagine how they would change characters to give them

epic qualities, and explore how an epic flaw would complicate the story. It should be stressed to them that this is a working definition and subject to change as they read and view epic stories. Along with the definition it's also important to stress the question of why people feel a need to create these epic stories and what makes them so compelling.

Students then examine their first text, a selection from *The Odyssey* , Book 9, with an understanding that it is considered epic and has qualities that have drawn readers to if for generations. Book 9 is dense, presenting the story of Odysseus from his departure from Troy as he tells it over dinner on his last stop home. Even though it's a third of the way into the story, this is an ideal place to begin reviewing and reinforcing the students' understanding of narrative elements as it both presents the book's protagonist and establishes the central conflict of the story. Teaching the students to identify conflict by discovering the protagonist, determining their motivation, and then looking for the forces that resist their efforts, they can get a clear handle on the plot.

After working through Books 9 – 12, students should be making progress toward the first two objectives. They should understand Odysseus as the protagonist and what is driving him on his journey. They see the misfortunes and tragedies befalling him and his men as the source of conflict, and should also see hints that Odysseus' own character is playing a part too. Being thrust into the world of the Greek gods, they are also having to familiarize themselves with a very unfamiliar setting as they read, and this is an important experience for them. First, the students must understand setting as more than time and place but the entire environment, and in *The Odyssey* that includes a space where supernatural beings may be encountered or called upon at any time. Secondly, students are about to view anime stories taken from the context of greater story arcs and they will need to be comfortable not knowing all the rules the story plays by when they watch. For instance, the first episode of *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* explains how alchemy works as a form of magic, that there are state-employed alchemists doing battle against rogue alchemist and other spiritual powers, and the protagonists work for the state but only to serve their own ends. However, it may be that Episode 62 compliments Odysseus' attack on the suitors in Book 22 – telling the entire backstory would be both laborious and distracting. If students become accustomed to discerning setting and being comfortable with what they don't know while paying attention to what they can figure out, the unit will have the necessary flexibility with pairing texts.

Now that Odysseus' story is established, it's time to examine how other epic stories begin. At this point a variety of anime stories can be introduced to the course of study. This allows conversations about the differences in approaches and form while at the same time creating a familiarity with series that can be used later on in the unit. *Evangelion* and *Attack on Titan (Shingeki no Kyojin*) have particularly explosive opening episodes, but *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* and *Samurai Champloo* are interesting too, and should be considered.

Once both *The Odyssey* and the anime selections have been introduced, and students have had time to experience, discuss, and reflect on the different forms of the epic narrative, the culminating project can be given to the students (see Tools: Culminating Project). The project assignment will show students what will be required of them to demonstrate their achievement of the unit objectives and serve as a point of focus for the rest of the study. Secondly, by thinking about and eventually choosing what kind of project they want to create, students start to commit to an approach in studying *The Odyssey* and the anime films. It forces them to address the immediate tasks in a greater context: instead of thinking, "What is the teacher asking me to do right now?" students are disposed to consider, "How can I use this material for my project?" With this secondary goal in mind, it's important to ask students to work on their projects continuously over the course

of the unit, and provide time in class to do so.

As students view various anime, the unit can progress through *The Odyssey* story in a variety of ways, depending on time demands or the dispositions of the student. It's impossible to cover the entire story, so it's a matter of deciding how to present Odysseus' narrative. The unit can move chronologically, from Books 9 – 12, then return to Books 5 – 8, picking back up on Book 13 and his return home. After Book 13 it could be useful to visit Books 1 – 4 to introduce Telemachus and the situation at home, or ignore them entirely to move forward with the narrative, even skipping to Book 17 if necessary to deal immediately with Odysseus and the suitors. Books 21 and 22 are crucial, containing the famous test of Odysseus and the slaughter of the suitors, and they are easily compared with the climaxes of any anime film.

It's important to remember that *The Odyssey* is a long story: twenty-four books roughly twenty pages each. The greatest danger in this unit is getting bogged down. Time passes quickly and pacing matters. Studying Books 9 – 12 does not have to mean reading Books 9 – 12. For 11th grade students it might be appropriate to read Book 9 in class, assign Book 10 for homework, then summarize Book 11 for the students and read a selection from Book 12 the next day. The same goes for the anime: the entirety of a feature-length film or anime episode does not need to be played for the students. The focus of the unit is on the epic story and how it's told: the idea of epic constrains the material, and the academic marking period constrains it as well.

Tools

Composition Journal

A dedicated journal for reflective writing will prove exceedingly useful for achieving the unit objectives. This will take the place of distributed worksheets or other organizers. As students read, watch, or discuss, they will make a record of their thinking in their journal.

There are two kinds of writing that the journal will hold. First, as students read or watch, they should record their response to the text. This should be free-writing, where students note whatever they think or feel about the story. As they move forward in their culminating projects they will write notes that help them remember useful observations later. This reflective writing will help students develop a sensitivity to how the story is presented to them.

Although free, reflective writing draws out interesting ideas, the students will tend to see only where their impressions guide them and miss the fruits of a thorough analysis. For this reason, the journal should be a record of the collaborative work done in class. Whether it is working with a partner or in small groups or a discussion as a class, for every text the students should have a written record of the breakdown of narrative elements. This simple, fundamental analysis creates a common framework for understanding what each story is – something concrete and objective that students can understand regardless of the quality of their response. Needless to say, it's important to make time both for students to respond in writing individually and for them to work together to analyze.

The composition journal also allows for synthesis and meaning-making when students are asked to consider their responses and analyses to write distinct interpretations of the stories. They can consider how the epic idea was conveyed, if there is a message or lesson behind it (for example, "Odysseus' struggles instruct us about the dangers of pride; what is the source of Shinji's struggles in *Evangelion* ?"). A variety of guided questions and open-ended prompts will cultivate sophisticated, organic, and meaningful thinking in the students. Their journals will be a valuable record of this.

Children's Books

Before introducing anime to the students, children's books provide a space for them to practice visual analysis. Texts that blend image and words are more useful than stories that have supplementary pictures (e.g., Lewis Carroll's *Alice' s Adventures in Wonderland* , Mary Pope Osborne's *The Magic Treehouse* series, or H. A. Rey's *Curious George* series, where the interpretation of the pictures is not necessary to the story). Allowing students to perform a different kind of analysis by thinking critically about a visual image with a text they find comfortable and highly familiar (and if not familiar, at least easy) creates a sense of confidence that will transfer to more difficult anime moving images. I'd also like to work with Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* , pairing short readings with the images of John Tenniel. These explorations would be practice runs where students write freely about the text and images for a page or so to see what they think, then we discuss as a class. The discussions would open a space for students to begin creating a discourse of reading visual images. Ideally, they will see how they can apply their knowledge of literary terms to a text by starting with these texts instead of with their terms.

As they practice this close reading, we will simultaneously begin reading the main text, and slowly students will transfer their study to it from the children's works. The following are some suggestions for children's books containing accessible text for study:

- Green Eggs and Ham, by Dr. Seuss
- *The Magic Treehouse* , by Mary Pope Osborne
- *The Polar Express* , by Chris Van Allsburg
- *Book of Nonsense* , by Edward Lear (though unfamiliar to the students, the pairing of text and image with his songs and limericks are clear but sophisticated)

Close Reads

These formative assessments will have the common focus of paying attention to form and craft. Too often I read literary analyses where students write about "imagery," "tone" or "attention to detail" without any real sense of what they are writing about. When writing about style or form, students tend to think of a literary term that they know well or have experience writing about or consider easy to find (or fake their way through), then they hunt through the text for some example that they can attach the term to. These essays are stilted and arbitrary, and a sadly too often a mockery of true close reading. I think the visual aspect of literature adapted into anime creates a different field for the students, and encourages a fresh approach. When students hear, "Analyze the author's style," they go to their bank of literary terms, but when they hear "What do you see? What does this look like?" "What makes this frame stand out from the rest?" or "How was that scene presented to you?" it encourages a more organic, thoughtful, and hopefully authentic response.

Essays

Essay writing is a helpful way for students to process their knowledge and for teachers to assess their progress. It holds students accountable for what they've learned and in many ways it formalizes the instruction. With this in mind, short but serious essays, assigned often after reflective and analytical writing, can help students grow in their thinking. Their composition journals stress reflective and analytical thinking, but an essay pushes them to interpret their analyses. Essays can be responses to specific prompts such as "Is there a theme in what keeps the soldiers from returning home in *The Odyssey* ?" or "In Attack on Titan, Episode 1, why is it important that Eren is improbably covered in his mother's blood?"

The more difficult but more easily applied prompt, and the one that forces original thought, is the universal, “What did you find meaningful in what we just saw [or read]?” It sounds cheap at first, as if the teacher didn’t really think too hard about what they assigned, but it actually forces a sophisticated intellectual maneuver: students must, with an open mind, read their analysis while considering the text it came from, and figure out what meaning that analysis points to that is greater than itself. Students must understand what meaning is before the can look for it, and then look an answer to that concept rather than a specific answer to a given question. Forcing students to find their own meaning is the best preparation for their own independent reading of text in the future. It naturally follows that the prompt that is easiest to assign is the most difficult to provide feedback for, but it is a rewarding experience for both parties.

Culminating Project

Students should be given a project that allows them to think about and determine the primary way they will engage with the texts as the unit progresses. The culminating project is meant to address the fourth unit objective – to engage students in creating meaningful inspired by the forms – so the students’ experience with the project is just as important as the outcome of their work. Handing the students choices for how to address their projects and then allowing them a sense of autonomy is preferable to assigning an essay. Possible projects could address the following questions:

- From what you have read and seen, what have you learned about epic narratives?
- Considering one scene or several we examined as a class, how does the anime form contribute to the story’s meaning?
- What “epic” anime left out of our study do you think deserves academic attention?
- If you were to create an original “epic” story or anime, what would that look like?
- After reading a timeless classic and viewing a variety of anime films, how would you like to represent what you have learned?

The first prompt is the easiest, perhaps, but it is direct and it addresses the fundamental point of the unit, and so it deserves consideration. Students who choose the second prompt are really doing a close-read assignment, so they will have to take careful notes during class and it may be helpful to allow class time for replaying requested scenes toward the end of the unit. Some of the more artistic students who choose to create their own epic story will appreciate the freedom to create a story-board as opposed to a typed narrative: they should be encouraged to pick very specific scenes to model and then explain their deliberate visual choices in writing. The final question, being completely open, should be approved before a student begins work so that it is sure to be academically rigorous.

Classroom Activities

Discovering Conflict

Of all the narrative elements, conflict is the backbone of a story: once students can discover what the conflict is, they can follow the plot and character development much more easily. The best way to help students do this is to break them out of the idea that conflict is a “problem” or a “protagonist versus antagonist” scenario. They are accustomed for looking for these two things, and the reductive nature of these approaches creates simple answers that are ironically more difficult to create than a more nuanced approach. Consider with the

students that conflict is an interaction of opposing forces. This is something general, something that can be seen anywhere. For instance, there is conflict when a rocket (exerting upward force) tries to escape gravity (earth's downward force). Before the rocket launches, there is no conflict; once the forces interact, conflict begins.

The same principles apply to human character. When someone is motivated to find something, they exert force to get it. If they obtain their desires easily, there is no conflict, but if there is another force resisting their actions, that is when conflict begins. If conflict is the interacting of opposing forces, the way to discover it is to discover one force, then the other. The questions the students want to hold in their mind are: What is the protagonist's motivation? and What is causing the protagonist resistance? These concrete questions are surprisingly easily answered by the students, and yet (like all good characters) the answers are complicated and fruitful for discussion. Presenting these questions to students repeatedly while studying *The Odyssey* (especially as Odysseus grows as a character) and insistently with every anime will both keep unity in the unit study and allow for sophisticated but accessible discussions.

Applied Theory

Studying Anime as Film

One experiences a pervasive feeling of art when viewing anime. As opposed to regular cinema, anime is entirely created by the artists who make it. Critics hesitate to treat animated sequences of images in the same way as photographic film, regardless of the essential similarities. Cinema tries to get at something aesthetically powerful, and it uses reality to do this. By viewing a different reality, the audience of cinema experiences something other than themselves, but this otherness confronts them with a new reality. The question is whether the form of anime can create this effect or an equivalent, and what the implication are of anime's intrinsic differences.

Whereas film demands attention to the actors, the mise en scene, and other concrete elements, anime has nothing concrete – instead of things, anime deals with images, and images are entirely imagined and constructed, the only reality being the ink and paint or programming and code. This break with reality is easy to ignore, but its a fundamental difference in that many anime strive still to represent to most powerful and real lived experiences without using reality. Furthermore, because of the totality of the creative representation, attention must be given to every aspect of any image. This is a common theme in each of the different ways of approaching anime to discover its value.

There are critics ready to defend anime from being typed as a sub-genre of cinema. Tom Gunning, in his essay, "Animating the Instant," draws attention to the fundamental similarities between anime and cinema that can't be ignored. While the anime filmmaker experiences "a freedom of image creation rather than the supposed indexical enthrallment to reality that photography entails" (Gunning 36), all filmmakers are creating the illusion of movement through a sequence of images. They are working with time, engaging both with instants and with continuity. Quoting Jodie Mack, Gunning paints the filmmaker as someone who can "treat one foot of 16mm film as one long canvas or forty tiny individual canvases" (Gunning 39). In both cases, filmmakers are using an apparatus to create continuity from a sequence of still images. Alan Cholodenko, in his essay, "'First Principles' of Animation," goes even further to argue that "not only is animation a form of

film but all film, film 'as such,' is a form of Animation" (Cholodenko 98). For him, animation should be the paradigm through which all film is viewed, instead of the other way around.

The apparatus of anime filmmaking is especially important to Thomas Lamarre, who, in *The Anime Machine* , writes at length about what makes anime special in its own right. The acts involved in composing both a still and moving image are distinct to anime, and quite complicated. He alludes to the term "compositing" to explain who a variety of layers work together to create the animated image (Lamarre xxiv). He looks both at the way images are put together and the movement intrinsic to anime to find value in both. Lamarre's careful and extremely thorough treatment of anime help draw out its worth as a form in itself.

Ways of Looking at Anime

Movement

Movement is fundamental and intrinsic to anime. First, there is the movement of the characters and objects on the screen. In this way we can look at anime in the same way as cinema. We can observe how characters are moving in relation to their environment, how they move in relation to each other, and how the camera "moves" in relation to its subjects. But there are other forms of movement at work as well. It's important to pay attention to the movement of the images themselves, as they are created and recreated frame by frame. Lamarre would like us to pay particular attention to the space in-between frames and how the images move within that space (xxv). The animation stand creates a place for the camera to combine and record a number of images, and the constraints of this apparatus are important to consider. Even the digitally-created anime makes use of a computer apparatus resembling the stand in its deliberate layering of images and creation of a sequence of frames. Giving students the awareness that the images they see are always a part of this apparatus can given them a sensitivity to the layering of images and the subtle shifts that happen as they are developed into film. Instead of questioning, "What do you see here?" the teacher can question the students, "What do you notice about how this is put together?"

Another interesting direction to take in exploring anime is its situation as a Japanese text. Lamarre situates the Japanese anime film in a modern cultural space of constant movement. This is an oversimplification, but it starts with the moving individual. We consume text on trains, for instance – a traditional and powerful metaphor for film – and we consume text quickly. Short manga magazines, web comic and phone article reading, television shows both on our phone or at home, all kinds of texts we consume either on the move or in brief periods of stasis. The texts themselves move too, as manga magazines become anime television shows, and those shows become movies that engage in different ways with the manga, and then the fan-generated manga and short videos engage with those forms: it is difficult to find a stable, canonical text. Instead of pinning anime down, Lamarre argues this is the fundamental condition of film, and we should explore how it moves (xx).

Animism and Objectification

Karen Beckman's introduction to *Animating Film Theory* gives a number of interesting approaches to studying anime. One of her first insights is that in anime everything is alive. There is a connection between life and movement. In studying anime, it's important to look for life where you least expect it. There's always a tendency to make inanimate objects human both in overt and inconspicuous ways. Being animated, however, these lives are non-threatening, and a reverse effect happens with living things: because they are drawn, they aren't as lively. They have less life for being represented in moving drawings. They aren't "real" people, so there is less emotional attachment when they are hurt or injured, giving violence in anime a kind of slapstick

quality (Beckman 4-5). Anime works to counter this through the narrative, giving added vitality to the characters it cares about by giving them a compelling story.

Utopia and Dystopia

Animation allows for the transformation and creation of our ideals and our ideal worlds. “Taken as a document of utopian thinking, animation shows a nature that is reformulated according to imagination and social prompts from a world that could one day and in some form be ours” (Leslie 30). The freedom of the anime filmmaker allows them to create new forms easily, and because of this anime often engages with fantasy scenarios. Just as anime worlds are molded, made perfect or destroyed, so too are characters: anime often engages with hybrid creatures (Leslie 31). Not only are people combined with animals, animals combined with animals, and fantastic monsters created, but there are also human-machine hybrids (there is often a biological link between human and the “mech” fighting machines they control, such as in *Evangelion* .) and humans take on magical or spiritual powers as well.

Ways of Looking at *The Odyssey*

The Odyssey is both story and poem, and its formal aspects deserve attention. Just as students look at an anime scene for its structure, form, and movement, so too should they examine Homer’s writing. The first and most concrete thing students will notice is how Homer describes important moments through extended simile. The poetry has a rhythm that moves it quickly through the story, but at times Homer pauses to dwell on a specific image, and this is the equivalent for the students of an important cinematic pause. Examining form is made even more appropriate since Homer’s use of figurative language draws attention to itself, and it allows for the easily discussed question, “Why *this* simile? Why *this* moment?”

Homer also uses the plot to draw attention to the act of storytelling. The opening invocation of the muse sets the tone for the story as one that will rely on the divine to convey itself with accuracy and beauty. Odysseus constantly engages with story telling, and he is aware of the importance of his own narrative. This draws attention to the frame of the narrative, and it allows for an interesting transfer to the study of anime. The students can question who is telling the story, and how they are receiving the story, and what difference that makes in their understanding of the narrative.

This text lends itself well to the themes portrayed in many of the most popular anime series, where a single group of people — and among them a hero — must stand against impossible odds. The anime I’ve researched so far also tend to portray external conflict as a reflection of the protagonist’s inner state, and when the main conflict is resolved the character also experiences a meaningful epiphany. Odysseus seems like he would fit right into this narrative structure. On the other hand, anime also has the potential to mirror themes in *The Odyssey* , for instance the consequences of hubris, coming to terms with responsibility and mortality, the nature and rules of leadership, and many other themes important to young adults. I would abridge Homer’s work to focus on a linear telling of Odysseus’ journey, and we would focus on his character development and the heroic cycle. As we read, I would introduce anime selections from various series that portray similar scenes, problems, or ideas in *The Odyssey* .

Anime Review

The idea behind focusing on these current, young-adult-focused anime is that I'd like to convey to the students that they don't simply close read something their teacher tells them is literary, but that if they find a story compelling to watch and follow then that too is worth investigating. In other words, I hope to make the students a little more curious about what they read or view, and that engaging with this curiosity by close reading and paying attention to form and style along with content is a practice that they'll always find rewarding.

It's interesting that the anime so often focus on an adolescent boy, and this boy is placed in front of challenges that even the wise and aged Odysseus struggled to meet. There's something validating in that for the students, many of whom face challenges at a young age that many adults don't see in their entire lives.

Attack on Titan (Shingeki no Kyojin)

This series imagines a future society living in technology from the past – horse and carriage transportation, muskets and cannons, a capitalistic and autocratic society. Human society has been almost eradicated from a plague of "titans": humanoid beasts between 5 and 15 meters tall who hungrily devour people, and the eat people alone. No one knows where they came from or why they feast on people, but the only way to destroy them – two precise slices at the base of the neck – is so difficult to execute humanity has had to resort to building walls to safeguard themselves from the titans. These three circular walls, one enclosing the other until reaching the capital city at the center, are enormous and sturdy, and the three circular walls segregate society in a class-system: areas closer to the outer walls are less safe, less desirable, and consequently poorer than those who are walled in the center of the country.

The story begins when a 60-meter titan appears and causes a breach in the outer wall. From this breach other titans pour into the city and ravage the inhabitants. The protagonist, a young boy named Eren Yeager, witnesses the death of his mother at a titan's hands and this inspires him to join the military to fight back. After years of training, he enters the elite Ranger units and begins his work. The twist of the story is his father was a scientist studying the titans and how to destroy them, and before leaving Eren he injected him with a chemical that allows Eren himself to turn into a titan at will.

This is a complicated plot, but the anime develops it quickly and it can easily be followed. However, if this series is used for the unit (and it is perhaps one of the strongest pairings), students must see the first episode. It will be very difficult to fill in the gaps with later episodes without a working knowledge of the setting and fundamental conflict.

Pertinent Episodes:

"To You, in 2000 Years: The Fall of Shiganshina, Part 1" (Ep. 1) – Sets the boundaries for the story, introduces the main characters and the titans. Includes a powerful moment where Eren witnesses the death of his mother. Defies clichés of heroism creating open expectations of what is to follow.

"I Can Hear His Heartbeat: The Struggle for Trost, Part 4" (Ep. 8) – This forms an interesting parallel with Odysseus. The titans have taken control of the armory and the soldiers desperately need supplies. Eren's friend Armin comes up with a very clever plan to defeat the titans, but he struggles with having the

confidence to propose it. The plan will put everyone's life at risk and if any part of the plan fails all the soldiers would be in great peril. Though not the protagonist, Armin's struggle is an interesting foil to Odysseus in the cave of Polyphemus. The viewer craves Armin to have more confidence, but Odysseus' reckless confidence in the cave cost the lives of many men. Where is the balance? Is there a right response? These questions are rich for discussion.

Evangelion

The first episode of this classic anime series is an excellent example of an epic text, and extraordinarily useful for sparking this conversation. It begins with a boy named Shinji Ikari waiting to be picked up by a beautiful woman who has sent him a postcard with instructions. He is alone on a sidewalk in a perfectly quiet city. The woman arrives and picks him up just as a massive explosion destroys the city. An alien, known as an "Angel" has arrived from space to wreak havoc. The woman, Misato Katsuragi, takes Shinji to an organization called NERV, dedicated to fighting these angels. NERV has built an enormous mech-fighter that can destroy the alien, but only very specific people are able to fly it. Shinji fits this profile, and this is the reason the woman recruited him. Shinji displays no self-confidence and he is extremely reluctant to pilot the machine. The episode ends with Shinji deciding to pilot it anyway, but he fails and allows the angel to destroy the robot. The robot takes on a life of its own at this point and rises up to destroy the angel even with Shinji unconscious inside.

This sets up the theme of the series. It's the story of a boy coming to know who he is in the face of extreme adversity. The first episode does an excellent job creating a high-stakes situation, constantly presenting marvelous scenes and explosive conflict. It presents the question, "What do you do when the world is ending, you're the only one who can save it, and you are the worst possible candidate to save it." Odysseus is strong, intelligent, and determined, but proud. Shinji is weak, reluctant, inexperienced, but he is humble. This presents an interesting contrast that should bring insights into both stories and characters when analyzed.

The following episodes in the series take a natural progression: more aliens come and they are destroyed by Shinji and a team of adolescents recruited around him. As Shinji fights he becomes more skilled, more confident, more mature. His companions, Rey Ayanami and Asuka Soryu, manifest personalities that Shinji has not developed yet, and the three of them interact in interesting ways. Asuka is a young girl who seems a perfect reflection of a young Odysseus, and Rey is all the things Shinji and Asuka want to be, yet she's cold and lacks a fundamental element of human warmth.

Although it would be impossible to show the entire series, the ending is worth watching anyway, especially as a contrast to *The Odyssey* Book 23. An angel lands – the last of many – more powerful than any other. Taking the form of a human, it befriends Shinji, then betrays him to infiltrate NERV to secure their most powerful weapon. When Shinji enters the mech to confront him, this angel tells Shinji to kill him. The angel says he understands why Shinji must destroy him, and he finds it agreeable. Naturally, Shinji then kills the angel, claiming final victory for humankind. I don't know if I've ever witness a more anticlimactic moment in any narrative I've read or watched. This interaction forces students to question the climax: it's supposed to be the most intense part of the story, but this was a quick and mundane moment. This climax suggests that the conflict was not between NERV and the angels, nor Shinji and the angels, but Shinji having the confidence to do what needs to be done. In the same way, this prompts a second look at the conflict of *The Odyssey* : perhaps it isn't really Odysseus trying to return home, but the conflict is Odysseus overcoming his vices and attaining, like Shinji, emotional maturity. The final episode of Evangelion ends with Shinji understanding that "It's ok!" to be himself, and when he says this phrase the characters, alive and dead, appear around him and

applaud. This series is useful for bringing to light how emotional development plays a role in the epic narrative.

Other Anime of Note:

Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood

This series follows the adventures of two brothers who have the power of alchemy: they can control the elements through magic rituals. They are trying to repair injuries done to themselves in the past while at the same time helping the people around them. This series has an outstanding first episode and a profoundly beautiful and powerful narrative arc. The series itself, at more than sixty episodes, is too large to study as a whole, but any episode can be examined both for elements of an epic narrative and its use of anime form. The artistry is direct, but there is a great deal of play with animism and hybridization that makes the series constantly interesting.

Spirited Away

Often called Hayao Miyazaki's greatest film, *Spirited Away* follows a young girl, Chihiro, inducted into a spiritual city on an adventure to save herself and her family. The ties to *The Odyssey* are apparent in her engagement with a world of magic, monsters, and creatures with god-like power. There is a thematic parallel in that it is the character of Chihiro that allows her to escape, just as it is the poor character of her parents that trap her there.

Nausicaa

This second Miyazaki film is named after its protagonist, Nausicaa, a girl who has a deep understanding of nature in a post-apocalyptic world. Gigantic monsters exist in this world as a threat to humanity, along with mysterious spores that cause immediate sickness and death when encountered. Whereas some people wish to combat these forms of nature, Nausicaa sees a solution through understanding them. This narrative offers parallels to *The Odyssey* through the protagonist's clear similarities and contrasts to Odysseus as well as the epic engagement with powerful monsters and numerous human enemies.

Your Name. (Kiwi No Na Wa.)

Two high school students, Mitsuha and Taki, wake up one morning to discover that they have switched bodies. This is further complicated by the fact that they live extremely different lives: Mitsuha as a girl in a rural village and Taki is a boy living in Tokyo. It lasts only for a day, and the occurrence happens unpredictably. The two students confront and then appreciate this exchange of identities, but then an unexpected catastrophe forces them to deal with an even more impossible situation. This film is a good narrative for exploring the epic genre because it begins with only small problems but then it escalates. It would be interesting to ask students to pinpoint when, exactly, this story becomes epic, and why.

Death Note

This series places a student, Light Yagami, in an extraordinary situation: he discovers a book that, when a name is written in it, will kill that person. He is given the power to kill at will and without discretion. He is joined by the book's owner, a *shinigami* , or god of death, called Ryuk, who watches with interest to see how the boy will behave. It's interesting because he has no vendettas, no desires for vengeance, and no desire to kill in general before receiving the book. The book acts on him, either changing him or bringing out his own

true character. This story works well as a foil to Odysseus own character, as circumstances change one for the worse, and one for the better.

Translations of *The Odyssey*

Robert Fagles

This is my recommended translation. It's not the easiest, but its attention to poetic form has an interesting effect with students: it starts off difficult, but over time it becomes easier and easier to read, and even enjoyable to students by the end. Fagles enjoys a reputation for creating excellent pairing of poetry and textual accuracy with this translation.

Richard Lattimore

A truly academic translation, Lattimore's *Odyssey* enjoys a strong following. This translation would be good for comparing with Fagles, but as a core text it can be exhausting to students without constant aid.

Robert Fitzgerald

Where Lattimore is academic, Fitzgerald is accessible. This is an easier text to read, and so it is tempting to use for reluctant readers. However, lacking the musicality of Fagles, this translation too can become difficult to sustain over time. This is a great translation to use if focusing on a variety of textual approaches and not working through the narrative in a sustained way.

Appendix: Bibliography

Lamarre, Thomas. *The Anime Machine* . Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2007.

This dense but incredibly valuable study of anime looks at the genre from top to bottom. Lamarre's introduction can be considered a thorough introductory essay on how to understand Japanese animations, and he takes a very intelligent approach in his union of text to culture. After the theory is introduced, he examines the varying phenomena of anime in the subsequent chapters. This book is a highly rewarding reading experience when read from beginning to end, but it's also useful as a reference guide for any areas of interest.

Beckman, Karen. *Animating Film Theory* . Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Beckman's introduction is the most valuable piece in this work, laying out all the different ways of approaching and finding value in animated film. She breaks it down into sections that are easily digested and immediately relevant. Containing a variety of essays by many authors on animated film in general, this book is a useful reference source for anime and its cinematic context. Particularly valuable are the articles that defend animated film from its detractors that it isn't "real cinema." Other articles provide useful ways to make

meaning from animations, and it can serve as a general context for the specific genre of anime.

Naremore, James. *Film Adaptation.* Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press. 2000.

Naremore has collected an outstanding series of essays dealing with the issues involved in adapting literature to film. His introduction not only give an overview of the themes and history of adaptation in cinema, but it gives an interesting narrative of the development of cinema in general. The subsequent essays deal theoretically and practically with film adaptation, and the first essay, by André Bazin, does a good job of dealing with these theoretical issues head-on.

Appendix: Implementing District Standards

This is a large unit, taking the space of an entire marking period, so there is a responsibility to address many standards throughout the course of it. It primarily focuses on the Reading: Literature anchor standard, with emphasis on 11-12.1 and 11-12.2. These two strands direct students to textual analysis of major themes and how the details of the text work toward developing them. As students follow multiple narratives they are both reading closely and making larger connections within anime, *The Odyssey* , and the epic concept.

Students will be writing expository pieces primarily, addressing the Writing standard with strands 11-12.2.A, B, and E. These strands focus on the development of explanatory writing through use of evidence and organization. Strand "E" in particular is important as it deals with formal writing and the integration of academic discourse. As students learn about anime and cinema and how they work, they will learn a new vocabulary along with a new way of thinking, and this should be reflected in their writing.

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