



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1987 Volume II: Epic, Romance and the American Dream

The Odyssey and The Morte Darthur: Reading and Making Observations for Writing and Discussion

Curriculum Unit 87.02.02
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This curriculum unit is appropriate for the junior and senior college levels at Hillhouse High School. It is designed to give the students a background and close reading in two of the classics of literature— *The Odyssey* and *The Morte Darthur* . Both of these books offer a history of literature, in the sense of the myths and legends interwoven in both of these narratives. I suggest reading only selections of the original versions of each piece, along with the abridged version for the full telling of the story.

A close reading of the history of a great narrative will enhance a student's enjoyment of the study of other works and of writing in general. In other words, a close study of these stories will help the students become literary critics and become capable of making comments and judgment of other materials read.

Along with reading assignments, writing a term paper on a literary topic is a requirement for the senior year. For many students it is the first time that they read any articles on literary criticism and attempt the process of literary criticism themselves. For others, it may be the first time they try to relate the characters from novels to themselves or real life situations.

However, before they write, students need to learn to read well—to observe what they read and ask themselves what they saw and why they enjoyed it. I have chosen to study *Morte Darthur* and *The Odyssey* to begin our study in the art of reading because so much of modern Western Literature derives its themes, allusions, even philosophies from the classic hero story of antiquity. Our very values are based in stories like these, which make up our cultural heritage. Thus reading and discussions of *The Odyssey* and *Morte Darthur* should enable the students to understand better the modern American literature used in the curriculum of the junior and senior year because these narratives are the basis for much of the literature of Western Civilization.

A student armed with these larger understandings is much more capable of writing a term paper on a literary topic. Therefore, a study of the themes of the classics, such as human wisdom and understanding of life earned through experience and challenges, as narrated in *The Odyssey* .

It is important to note, however, that this first stage of study is on reading and observation and on the acquisition of background. This background is both content-oriented and process-oriented. That is, students will be learning about characters and behaviors central to an understanding of Western Literature, and they will be learning about them through practice of the beginning fundamentals of critical thinking, that of observation and comprehension. Thus, the activities of this first part focus on the following types of teaching:

The students will:

1. Learn about heroes and their actions;
2. Learn to recognize the major themes contained in their actions (jealousy, bravery, etc.);
3. Learning to observe and recognize the importance of their observations as evidence;
4. Learn to select significant excerpts from the readings as worthy of further attention.

In other words, there is much to be done and taught that will enable students to write well that precedes the actual stages of writing. Thus this unit will emphasize, first, the processes of reading and thinking about what we have read. Only then will we as a class begin to connect how we have thought to how we will write in the second stage. For example, our observation stage in reading will become the basis for the evidence stage we develop in writing.

Understanding these universal themes of civilization will begin in the Fall. Putting American literature in perspective through the two classics is a project that will take a whole semester. However, the practical outcome will provide the catalyst for writing thesis statements for a literary term paper. Knowing content and discussing what has happened in a book is a stage that has to precede any thesis development. A period of dwelling on the books and recognizing important ideas is a necessary stage that must precede any writing on the material. The first two classroom units are based on a close reading of *The Odyssey* and *Morte Darthur* and encourage appreciation and understanding of the myths and legends of these works. Along with this is a comparison of the heroes of these narratives—Odysseus and Arthur—through their times. As beginning practice in thesis thinking, we will compare the ancient hero Odysseus, who honors the gods and goddesses of Mt. Olympus to Arthur, the hero of medieval days and Christian beliefs.

The last classroom unit will be a practice for the writing of thesis statements. I include the writing of thesis statements in this curriculum to help the students understand and make the connection between the accumulation of reasons, characterizations, facts and details needed to support statements they make about literature.

Objectives for this unit are:

1. To encourage students to analyze the characteristics of the main and minor characters of the two selections.
2. To encourage students to read carefully and to interpret what they have read.
3. To help students choose important paragraphs in a novel and develop thesis statements around interpretations they know they can prove.
4. To enable students to understand the epic traditions in literature.
5. To understand the nature of the Romance.

These activities are all designed to encourage the student to value his or her observations, without the added pressure of having to make an argument out of those observations. I would say that, on the high school level, many students as yet do not understand the importance of their observations in the formation of argument. Thus, much of this early study is centered around encouraging students to learn the art of observation and to take pride in their ability to see and respond to the text.

As the unit continues, we will:

1. Read an abridged version of *The Odyssey* in order to quickly learn the myths and sense of adventure.

2. Read Book XXI "The Test of the Bow" from the original text, translated by Robert Fitzgerald, to acquire a sense of the vivid poetry and metaphor.

Review characters, places, events.

Telemachus

Minerva and Athena

Ithaca

Penelope

Menelaus and Helen

Calypso—beautiful mythic creature who detains him 7 years.

The court of Alcinous, daughter Nausicaa

The descent into Hades to meet Achilles Agamemnon Cyclops

Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis

The suitors

3. Read Book XX of *The Morte D'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory.

4. Give classroom lectures on the background of both *The Odyssey* and *The Morte D'Arthur* as given in Part II of this paper.

Part II. Homer's Universe: Background for the student

The epic, the hero's story, is wonderful material for high school students. They enjoy learning the myths and have a high retention for these stories. The outline of the Trojan War is not given in *The Odyssey* and should be reviewed with the students as background material. Homer treated the war itself in *The Iliad*.

Helen of Troy, daughter of Zeus and Leda, is the most beautiful woman in the world. She chooses Menelaus, King of Sparta, to be her husband and the other Kings of Greece swear an oath to support their alliance. Paris, son of Troy's King Priam, sees Helen and desires her. She has "the face that launched a thousand ships." Aphrodite, goddess of love, helps Paris to kidnap Helen because he had chosen her (Aphrodite) to receive a golden apple marked "to the fairest" in a contest on Mt. Olympus between Aphrodite (Venus) and Athena.

Following the kidnapping of Helen, the other Kings of Greece join Menelaus to fight the city of Troy and return Helen to Sparta. For nearly 10 years the Greeks besieged Troy. Great warriors emerge and their fate is told again in *The Odyssey*. For example, Achilles and Agamemnon, Greek warriors, and Hector, the greatest Trojan Warrior. Finally, Achilles kills Hector. The war ends with a gift from the Greeks, the Trojan Horse. The Greeks build the Trojan horse and hide warriors inside while pretending to sail away. That night, the Trojans take the horse into the city and during the night the Greek warriors creep out and they open the city's gates. The Greeks sack the city and win the war. The Trojan Horse is the idea of the Greek Warrior Odysseus. The story of *The Odyssey* is Odysseus' journey home. It is now 20 years since he has seen Penelope and his son Telemachus.

The gods play an important role in the character's lives. Odysseus has the protection of Athena, while Poseidon (Neptune) is angry at him and gives him misery on his voyage home.

The text of *The Odyssey* is in a special measure of verse, dactylic hexameter. Six meters in each line and dactyl means a heavy syllable followed by two light ones. The sixth foot is always a spondee (two heavy syllables). Homer composed *The Odyssey* around 720 B.C. Very little is known about him except that he was blind and that he was a minstrel who recited these epics for entertainment.

The Universe of Arthur and the Round Table: Legends evolving under the influence of Christianity on Western Civilization.

It is always good to give the story to the class before reading the text. The English language of Malory is rich in alliteration and many words are not in use in our language today. So, to avoid confusion and to promote enjoyment of the language I strongly advise giving a lecture on the story of Arthur Book II, allowing for the details to be filled in when reading the text.

The last book of *Morte Darthur* is the final chapter of the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere. In earlier books Lancelot repents of his behavior, but only to relapse into his old desires for the Queen Guinevere. Finally, Mordred, the traitor, uses the situation to suit his own ambitions and forces Arthur's knights to take sides against Lancelot, thus breaking up the Round Table. When Lancelot and the Queen are discovered together, Lancelot is exiled to his castle Joyous Gard. However, the Queen is condemned to die by fire and she is abducted at the last moment by Lancelot and taken to Joyous Gard. A battle ensues in which Gawain receives a mortal wound from Lancelot. Arthur's absence from his homeland enables Mordred to take over the kingdom and Arthur receives his own death-wound at the hand of this traitor Mordred. Queen Guinevere goes to a nunnery where she takes a vow of penitence, dying soon after. Lancelot, too, takes a vow of penitence and dies of grief over Guinevere and his lord Arthur.

Part III. Observations made in the reading lead to interpretation which leads to thesis statements.

After the readings, and after an assimilation of the basic storyline, students are ready to talk about the text. Learning to discuss a text, telling what you've observed, and organizing those observations are all important steps to critical thinking and thesis writing. In class this talking takes the form of making observations—for example, a student could say, "It seems as though they were always eating or having a big feast in *The Odyssey*." This statement is an observation, and the student should be encouraged to state what he has seen as much as possible and to take pride in his ability to respond to the text. This observation becomes an interpretation if the teacher asks "So what?" or "So what do you think about that?" One answer or interpretation could be that hospitality and generosity in the home were highly valued by the Greeks. Thus interpretation forms the beginning of a thesis type sentence. The student must learn to place the two statements together to make up a whole idea: The Greeks valued hospitality and generosity because they spent many hours preparing feasts for others. The following diagram suggests the logical sequence of this activity.

Comment or observation—Question? "So why?" or "So what about it?"—Interpretation.

Example 2. Student comment on Book 21. "The Test of the Bow" "Odysseus was smart to enter his home in disguise." This is an observation to be followed by questions of "Why was he smart?" or "So why do you think this is important?"—There are many answers which would be insightful and involve interpretations such as "Odysseus learned to be wise in all those years of adventures," or "This disguise shows Odysseus' craftiness, another quality admired by the Greeks."

A good rule of thumb for a teacher is to follow all comments of students with questions asking "Why?" or "So what?" In each case the teacher is trying to get each student to ask himself "What have I observed and what do I think?". "Why do I think it, and why is it important?"

This observation—question—interpretation is the basis for teaching critical thinking. Yet, in a practical sense this very method is the key to developing strong thesis statements. This kind of questioning draws on the strengths of the students because it draws on their own knowledge (their observations) and on their own connecting ideas (their interpretations).

The task of teaching critical thinking does not begin with teaching a student to conceive of a thesis idea . . . the traditional place to begin . . . but sees the formulation of a strong thesis as the *final step*, the last accomplishment of a series of activities all designed to grasp and enjoy the literature they are reading.

Using the themes of these classics and then asking the students to show the validity of theses statements is another way of building competency in writing on literature.

There are numerous themes that teachers can use to help students articulate and then prove as thesis statements. The following are ones I have found useful:

Themes of *The Odyssey*

1. The establishment of order. The Greeks believed that the world had an ordered existence for society. Odysseus struggles to put his home in order.
2. Odysseus' Search for Identity

Odysseus has to struggle not only to get home but to reestablish himself as King at home. Odysseus must be a leader and hero. When he loses his men on the way home, he must survive by his wits alone. All his adventures may be interpreted as temptations that might lead to false identities. For example, he must refuse Calypso's offer for immortality so that he can go home.

Themes from *Morte Darthur* : As a contrast to the gods and goddesses of the Greeks, we have the Christian themes of the *Morte Darthur* .

1. The search for the Holy Grail or the Sangreal which gives rise to the code of purity and dedication.
2. The unfaithfulness of Guinevere and the result.
3. The treachery of Mordred, son of King Arthur, by his sister Morgan LeFay.
4. Finally the tragic clash of loyalties of Lancelot vs. Gawain, Lancelot and Guinevere and Lancelot vs. Arthur. Arthur's affection for his two opponents and his deep sorrow (pg. 773. Vinaver) as they become enemies.

Classroom Unit One

Objective To teach the process of observing and understanding how observations lead to interpretations. To introduce the qualities of the Romance to the class, to identify the genre of *The Odyssey* and the *Morte Darthur* . To teach the process of observing and understanding how observations lead to interpretation.

Procedure Lecture and discussion.

Class takes notes on qualities of Romance literature.

Activities Write on board: Qualities of Romance.

1. Wish fulfillment, or having a desire and searching and attaining that desired object.
2. Adventure of the hero.
3. Success at the end, or happy ending.

Quest A long journey or search for a spiritual or physical object or place. The quest is part of Odysseus' life and Arthur's life.

Day 1. Divide the class into groups of four or five and assign the hero Odysseus—Search and Adventure—to each group. Ask each group to support or illustrate the topic with five examples. This should be very easy because Odysseus had many adventures and he was searching for his home. Have one person in each group record contributions for fifteen minutes. Regroup as a class and make a detailed account of groups findings on the board.

Day 2. Pass out copies of Book XXI “The Test of the Bow” from *The Odyssey* translated by Robert Fitzgerald. Read aloud in class and discuss in what way the hero Odysseus is a success. Write contributions of class on board.

Day 3. Divide the class into groups of four or five and assign Arthur the hero—Search and Adventure. Information of these legends will have to be taken from the *Idylls of the King*, which is in the book room. It should be pointed out to the class that Arthur’s Knights went in search of the Holy Grail (Sangreal the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper). Ask each group to give five examples of the adventures of Arthur’s Knights. Regroup and compile findings on the board.

Classroom Unit Two —(2 days)

Objective To introduce the gods and goddesses of Greek mythology, along with Roman names and to show that they still are integrated in our Twentieth Century culture.

Procedure Filmstrip and notes taken in class. *Myths of Greece and Rome* two filmstrips and record. Show filmstrip on two successive days. Takes whole period for each filmstrip with time allowed to take notes on the gods and goddesses.

Activities Write Archtypes and Universal symbol on board. Introduce Archtypes or Universal symbols which are the essence of the myths. We can recognize them and so can others because they (the symbols) are part of what Carl Jung calls the “collective unconscious.” For example, people living in widely separated times and places produce similar myths (e.g. water is symbol of the beginnings of life). Venus goddess of love or Aphrodite born whole from the sea or water. (Passionate love responsible for the continuation of life—etc.) Have students take notes from the filmstrip which gives the names of the gods and goddesses. For example:

The Gods and Goddesses

Greek	Roman	Symbol
Helias	Apollo	Sun
Poseidon	Neptune	the Sea
Zeus	Jupiter	the King of the Gods
Aphrodite	Venus	Love
Athena	Minerva	Wisdom
Hermes	Mercury	the Messenger
Ares	Mars	War
Hera	Juno	wife of Zeus

Dionysus	Bacchus	Wine
Hades	Pluto	God of Underworld
Hephaestus	Vulcan	the Forger of Iron
Ariadne	Diana	the Hunt

Homework assignment Use reference books on art or mythology and find pictures as well as stories of both Roman and Greek major gods. Write summaries of the stories of two gods or goddesses. This is a way of getting the student to recognize what they have read.

Classroom Unit 3

Objective Teaching the student to make observations—task directed.

Procedure Compare the hero Odysseus to the hero Lancelot.

Day 1 Ask the class to find incidents or quotations which validate the following statements:

- | | |
|---|--|
| Christian Hero | <i>Ancient Greek hero</i> |
| Lancelot VS. | <i>Odysseus</i> |
| 1. Battles for the sake of others | 1. Odysseus battles for himself first, then for his men. |
| 2. Selflessness is honored. | 2. Pride is both honored and a fault. |
| 3. Christian hero is chaste, pure, modest | 3. Greek hero is crafty, clever, persistent. |

Day 2 Find quotes for these statements.
Qualities both heros have are physical strength, courage, intelligence, brave, will to win.

Bibliography

Graves, Robert. *The Greek Myths* . Vol. 1 & 2. New York: George Brazillles, Inc. 1955.

This book is a classic reference book of Greek myths giving complete accounts of all gods and goddesses. I highly recommend it for both students and teachers.

Griffith, Kelley Jr. *Writing Essays About Literature : A Guide and Style Sheet*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, Inc., 1982.

This book offers students step by step assistance in all aspects of writing essays about literature.

Homer. *The Odyssey*, translated by Robert Fitzgerald. Garden City; New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Co., 1963.

This book is the most popular and most recognized translation of Homer. I recommend xeroxing Book 21 "The Test of the Bow" for close reading in class. The critical essay at the back of the book provides essential interpretations of the text.

Homer. *Homer to Brecht : The European Epic and Dramatic Traditions* . ed. by Michael Seidel and Edward Mendelson. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977.

This book is a reference book for teachers and contains an essay on *The Odyssey* by M. J. O'Loughlin. It is a good essay to read to generate classroom questions and discussions on this epic.

Lewis, C. S. *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* . Cambridge: University Press, 1966.

An important essay on *Morte Darthur* is included in this book and gives insight into Malory's life and his work as well as the text itself.

Malory, Sir Thomas. *Morte Darthur*, Vol. 2. London: New York: Everyman's Library, 1906.

I recommend xeroxing Book XX of King Arthur for reading in class. "And hereafter followeth the most piteous history of the morte of King Arthur, which is the Twentieth Book.

Malory, Sir Thomas. *Malory Works* . ed. by E. Vinaver. London: Oxford University Press, 1971.

This book contains a version of *Morte Darthur* with antiquated spellings. It is most useful for the notes on the text which offer Vinaver's insights into Malory's version of this legend.

Otto, Walter F. *The Homeric Gods : The Spiritual Significance of Greek Religion* translated by Moses Hadas. New York: Pantheon, 1954.

This book gives the reader understanding as well as information. For example, "It is often said that it is the needs of human nature, and their growth and change that are expressed in the (pg. 10) formulation of the gods." "The Chapter on Religion and Myth in High Antiquity" is informative reading for the teacher of this unit.

Owen, D.D. R. *Noble Lovers* . New York: New York University Press 1975.

This is a beautiful book with 105 illustrations, some full page color photos of medieval art, showing the royal courts and the allegories of love. There is a chapter on "Lancelot: Courtly Lover" and another on "The Legacy of Courtly Love".

Reid, Margaret. *The Arthurian Legend : Comparison of Treatment in Modern and Medieval Literature: A Study in the Literary Value of Myth and Legend*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1938.

This book gives a wonderful account of the historical and literary influence of the legends of Arthur. It is an excellent reference for teachers and should be used as a resource for classroom lectures.

Tatlock, J. S. P. *The Legendary History of Britain : Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and Its Early Vernacular Versions*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1950.

This is an excellent reference book for teachers and students doing papers. There is a section on Arthur and a section on Merlin.

Classroom Materials

Filmstrips from Hillhouse Library:

The History of Ancient Greece .

6 filmstrips

Myths of Greece and Rome

2 filmstrips and record

Classics of Medieval English

Records:

Edith Hamilton: *Echoes of Greece*

The Iliad and The Odyssey .

Videos:

Greek Epic . FFH766D VHS \$149. Films for the Humanities, Inc. Box 2053, Princeton, N. J. 08543. 40 minutes, color.

This is an exploration of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and the keys to reading them for edification and enjoyment: The nature of epic, the Greek concepts of honor and fame, and the journeys of Achilles and Odysseus as heroes' quests for identity.

Greek and Roman Legends FFH848D: VHS Films for the Humanities, Inc., Box 2053, Princeton, N.J. 08543

This video includes stories of: The Judgment of Paris, The Trojan War, Achilles Choice, Odysseus and The Trojan Horse. 35 minutes, color.

Heroes and Men FFH705D VHS Beta \$199. Films for the Humanities, Inc. Box 2053, Princeton, N. J. 08543.

The work of Homer: The site of Olympia (birthplace of the Olympic games and the sanctuary of Zeus) Delphi. 52 minutes, color.

The Legend of Arthur FFH895D VHS \$149. Films for the Humanities, Inc., Box 2053, Princeton, N. J. 08543.

This video is an examination of the blend of history, mythology, religion and prophetic dreams that constitute the Arthurian legend. The program shows where the legend is set, illuminations and other illustrations of the Arthur stories, and covers both the principle stories and their meanings. 26 minutes, color.

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