



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

“The Treasure of the Sierra Madre: An American Grail”

Curriculum Unit 87.02.03
by Casey Cassidy

Throughout recorded history men have attempted to make sense of their lives, to give it meaning through external means. These may be physical, philosophical, or religious in nature. Many are the tales of adventures in search of stones of magical ability, fountains of youth, golden amulets of fantastic power, the grail supposedly possessing spiritual and life giving properties, and thousands of other objects that have fired man’s imagination and desire. Even in our own time men continue to search for these “somethings.” These quests are about mankind’s search for itself, an immortality of the flesh and spirit.

My reasons in presenting my unit are several. First and foremost I would like to present my students with the idea of the quest. Why do men leave home in search of things? Things both material and spiritual. Secondly, I would like students to gain an introductory appreciation for a new and different literary experience. I want them to be exposed to the ideas and literature of another time and place. These will be contained in some very brief readings and discussions centering on the nature of the grail and the early quests for it. Third, there will be a study of man’s obsession with gold. This yellow metal has transcended its purely economic value and has attained an importance reserved only for magical and spiritual objects. Finally our discussion of the grail, gold, questing, and man’s nature will culminate in a critical reading of the fascinating and revealing book by B. Traven, “The Treasure of the Sierra Madre.”

There may be no profound and grand relationship relating the grail, gold, quests, and the characters and themes found in Traven’s novel. Yet nevertheless I think there is a connection; a common thread running through each of these. The knights who quested after the grail, the many adventurers who have searched for treasure and magical things, and the proletarian prospectors in “The Treasure of the Sierra Madre” all have been looking for essentially the same things. For some of these men these things would simply be on the level of material acquisition, such as wealth or power. For a few, these things would transcend material wealth and ascend to a level where the search becomes, as for some of the knights, “a journey of the soul,”¹ and for some of the characters in “The Treasure of the Sierra Madre,” a “quest for identity, dignity, and individual freedom.”²

As to the actual reading of the quest for the grail, only several brief selections from Morte D’Arthur will be used, coupled with some readings from T.H. White’s “The Once and Future King.” The reason for only a brief reading of these pieces is based on a certain practical consideration. How do you present literature of another time and period and some considerably complexity to students whose language and reading skills may be weak? Probably my students and I will do so group readings of certain selections. These will then be

discussed.

To have the students become acquainted with these readings and develop some critical appreciation for them I will, prior to the actual readings, explain and outline the nature of the grail, discussing the possible magical and spiritual powers.

Throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries there was written a large body of romantic literature, verse and prose dealing with the quest for and attainment of an object of some supposed mystical and religious power. This object was the grail, or Holy Grail. This grail was thought to be endowed with food and life giving properties, wrought with gold and precious stones and emitting a brilliant light. The grail was also thought to be a Reliquary; the Dish from which Christ and His Disciples ate on at the Last Supper, the Cup of that Meal or the Vessel in which Joseph of Arimathea received the blood from the wound of Christ. This grail also possessed the mysterious power of being able to appear and disappear automatically. Ultimately anyone who succeeded in fulfilling the Quest by obtaining the Grail would obtain much more than mere possession of an object, they would obtain spiritual enlightenment and the understanding of the deep things of God. ³ Consequently, the theories and interpretations concerning the origin of the grail are of three thoughts: one holding that the grail stories were purely Christian legends, and the second maintaining that the grail far from being a Christian idea was more likely to be the object of some folklore origin, probably Celtic. The third is known as the ritual theory. The theory holds that from earliest times the most widespread method of symbolizing the annual natural process of growth and decay was that which regarded the animating spirit of Nature under an anthropomorphic form. This form took the identity of different gods in different cultures, the best known being the Greek god Adonis. Adonis represented the rite of renewal, the restoration of life. The development of this rite of life renewal as represented by the gods, led over a time to the powers associated with the kings of the lands. The health or infirmity of the King was tied directly with prosperity or waste of land. Some scholars believe that from this connection stories developed which were directly related to the Quests. The achievement of the Quest would bring it restoration to health and also youth. Scholars fairly well agree that the grail has come to represent the search for the source of life, life physical, life immortal. In the final analysis the idea of the Grail and the Quest for it would seem best explained and understood by accepting it as a purely Christian experience. ⁴ Several scholars feel that this comes closest to capturing the essence of this fantastic, mystical experience. As Professor Waite has stated in his book "The Holy Grail," "All sacred symbols serve at need to open figurative gates and everlasting portals on the world's verge of emblem". ⁵ The Quest therefore is a search after God. "The Grail is an early recognition that doctrinal teachings are symbols which are no more meant for literal acceptance than any express fables. The quest is not pursued with horses or clothed in armor but in the spirit. Christ's blood in the Grail Cup is there and it is not there." ⁶

That the grail was never located and in fact may never have existed is secondary to efforts, imagination, dreams, and quests in search of this object. As Professor Waite said, "in the spirit." ⁷ It was the quest itself that transformed men more than any actual discovery.

Gold, in its real monetary value and in its symbolic representations, has historically served to open literal and "figurative gates." ⁸ Traven's characters in "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre" in their search for gold were consciously and unconsciously looking to open these very gates. There are reasons for believing that faith in enchantments was connected with the rise of the power of gold. Gold intrinsically has no more nor less value than many other metals. What then is the force of gold's appeal? How has gold come to represent value?

Gold was originally connected in men's minds with magic, it rose to prominence as a charm, a favored method of control of the dread unseen world. The very color of gold became associated with the sun. To most early

peoples the sun was an object of worship, as evidenced in Egypt, Assyria, Peru, and by the early inhabitants of our own land. The sun was considered to have magical, life-perpetuating properties and gold, sharing with the sun qualities of color and brilliance, became closely associated with these.

That gold was pleasing to look at was secondary; the important consideration was that it was connected with the sun-god. ⁹ Gold would, when worn as jewelry, act as a charm, and guarantee the wearer good luck, long life, and protection against devils and demons. Men would go to any lengths and endure almost any sacrifice to secure gold's magical protection.

There is much evidence connecting gold with the gods and goddesses that protected and gave life. The cowrie shell of ancient Egypt came to be prized as a token with life-giving properties. ¹⁰ Its appeal as a magical amulet grew and spread only after these cowrie shells were fashioned in gold. Their reputation for life-giving was originally based on their shape, but after they began to be fashioned in gold this magical ability was in effect "transferred from the mere form of the amulet to the metal itself." ¹¹

As Pharaohs and other rulers came to believe that gold was connected with life-prolonging qualities, even with immortality, they would risk any hazard to obtain it.

This mentality of valuing gold as something sacred and magical carries through even to our own time. The acquisition of this yellow metal has been the motivating spirit behind countless adventures, gold rushes, trade and gold wars.

Gold operated like a magnet, an enchantment, even an addiction. The stories of the Spanish conquistadors are filled with revelations of how incredibly strong gold was in acting as an agent of imagination and adventure. Beccara, Pizarro, Ayora, Ojeda, Ponce De Leon, and Coronado all gave themselves up to the insatiable quest for gold.

Stanton A. Coblentz in his book "Avarice A History" makes a remarkable, insightful point about the motivations of men. He says, that, "we can judge much about men's minds from the stories they tell, and the myths they cherish; for men center their myths about that which they admire and desire." ¹² Mr. Coblentz feels that for these men the tales of the Seven Cities of Cibola, and Eldorado with its Naked Man of Gold standing brilliantly in his boat "were in a sense real; they were real reflections of the minds of the Spaniards. Eldorado existed as the translation of man's dreams and hopes into a fable. The fable itself was false, but the impulse that embraced it was genuine." ¹³

There seems to be a parallel in all of this down through history. Those who believed in amulets and sun gods, those who searched for the wondrous grail, those who plundered across Central America, and the prospectors who spent entire lives looking for gold all were caught up in this desire to find a treasure. A treasure that surely transcended mere material wealth and became a passion of dreams. The quest is what either destroyed the man or elevated him.

The life of B. Traven is fascinating and therefore this unit will spend some time on his biography. The unit will then proceed to a discussion of several of Traven's major writings and their themes. The main emphasis will be on "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre."

There is much confusion over Traven's image as a man and writer. He is often referred to as a proletarian writer. One critic has written that, "Traven is a writer of and for that class of people left at the outer edges of

the glittering but anguished American Dream.”¹⁴

Traven was born in Chicago in 1890. His real name was Traven Torsvan, he was of Scandinavian worker parents and English was his native tongue. He traveled much, lived in various countries under different names until he finally settled in Mexico at the age of 30. He wrote well in English, German Spanish, appearing in print as “B. Traven” for the first time in a liberal his first novel, “The Death Ship,” was published in Germany in 1926.

Traven rejected publicity and refused to meet the press or public or furnish photographs of himself. He concentrated on his career, and had eight books published in five years. Traven wrote many novels, short stories, and essays until his death in 1969. Only a few of his works have been translated into English, and the bulk of these only recently. Though Traven wrote his early novels in both German and English, it was the German and later in Mexican audiences that formed the bulk of his popularity. Not until 1936, with the publishing of “The Treasure of the Sierra Madre” in English was Traven able to find some measure of success with the United States audience. Even to this day he is generally unknown in the United States except for this book. Of all of his writings, probably his most important were his first three novels, “The Death Ship,” “The Cotton-Picker’s Song,” and “The Treasure of the Sierra Madre.”

Each of these books is different from the other in plot and setting. Yet these three, like all of Traven’s novels, revolve around certain essential ideas. These ideas invariably deal with working class men, possessing little or no negotiable capital. These characters are in search of the one thing that will allow them to leave the edges and move into a more mainstream way of life. Each of these novels is very clearly about a quest.

“The Death Ship, The Story of an American Sailor” is the story of a young sailor unable to prove his identity as an American. He has no passport. Unable to prove his identity he becomes a man without a country. He is driven across borders in search of a passport (identity).

“The Cotton-Pickers’ Song” is a novel of working men, real men looking for work. The quest is the same for each of the characters in this novel; to find work that is reasonable and honorable, and to give an honorable, productive effort in return. This story is clearly one of a work-quest.

“The Death Ship” and “The Cotton-Picker’s Song” are considered Traven’s finest novels, while “The Treasure of the Sierra Madre” is his most popular. This book has a huge reputation as an adventure story. Several critics feel very strongly that this novel has been unfairly pigeonholed as an adventure story only, and that it ranks with Traven’s best work in exploring man’s quest for dignity and identity in his life. The novel begins with the following epigraph:

“The treasure which you think not worth taking trouble and pains to find, this alone is the real treasure you are longing for all your life. The glittering treasure you are hunting for day and night lies buried on the other side of that hill yonder.”¹⁵

The three main characters, Howard, Dobbs and Curtin dream of gold. Howard warns them that you “can-never but love with gold,”¹⁶ and he repeatedly warns the younger men of the corruptive powers of gold.

The three men pool their meager resources and set out into the mountains to find their treasures (destinies). Dobbs and Curtin are amazed at Howard’s climbing ability, his endurance in hiking mile after mile through the most treacherous country imaginable. Howard’s endurance would seem to stem as much from his zest of life, his enjoyment in questing after a goal as anything else. Surely the excitement of their journey, the pleasure of

finding gold. Howard, through his physical example and through his wise, experienced philosophy of moderation emerges as a leader to both Dobbs and Curtin. Dobbs allows Howard to head their little expedition for practical purposes. Howard knows gold, Dobbs doesn't. For Curtin, Howard is more a teacher, a father figure one who knows the world and has developed a sort of practical philosophy about it. These qualities will eventually allow Howard to discover a treasure far more meaningful than gold. As the three men search for gold they encounter all manner of obstacles, wind storms, dense tropical jungles, deserts, etc. Exhausted, Curtin and most obviously Dobbs want to quit. Howard is furious. He knows the necessity of working hard and long to extract something of value.

Eventually they are able to coax a small fortune from the earth, about \$6,000.00 worth of gold dust. Dobbs, always the unsatisfied and untrusting, wants to divide this up. He wants his. This is really the first sign on mistrust. Though Howard begins to notice the signs of gold fever in Dobbs, he agrees to a division of shares. Curtin, following Howard's lead also agrees to the split.

Leaders, be they Kings, generals or someone as "small" as the wise old Howard are unable to entirely rein in the desires of men when what they are seeking is not spiritual fulfillment but profit. Curtin would be happy to locate only about \$25,000.00 in gold. He would use his treasure to operate a small orchard, growing peaches. Howard would certainly be happy with a limit of \$25,000.00. He would open a grocery store and read all day. Both of these characters have an ability to dream dreams that are attainable, reasonable and clearly connected to some understanding of the need for limits. Dobbs on the other hand wants nothing less than \$50,000.00 and really wants \$75,000.00. He clearly has no understanding of the virtues of moderation and can rationalize whatever position serves him best. His constant lack of trust, accusations, and petty selfishness put a terrible strain on the relationship of the three men and severely undermines their ability to work as a team. Dobbs' mistrust and unquenchable desire for gold eventually allow him to show his true character (or lack of same) in his threats to kill, both Curtin and a secondary character named Lacaud. This idea of killing really calls into question just how far "civilized" men will go in protecting their material interest.

After dealing with the intruder Lacaud and fighting with blood-thirsty bandits, the three prospectors have accumulated \$35,000.00 a piece. They agree to leave the mountains. Even Dobbs has enough (hardship, not gold). Before they leave, Howard wants to restore the mountain that has been so generous to its original condition. I think this act says so many remarkable things about Howard. It shows his innerspirit regarding the healing process. It reveals almost a belief in nature as a kind of being, almost a spiritual awareness that man is but a part of larger tapestry.

Just before leaving the mountain Howard tells the tale of don Manuel Rodriguez. This story illuminates Traven's feeling about value and profit, and clearly serves to show Howard's ability to keep the value of gold in perspective. It is the Indian chief in this tale who by giving away his claim to his gold mine is able to restore his son's sight. He like Howard knows that gold has no real value. He says "I do not need gold. I have plenty to eat. I have a young and beautiful wife whom I love and who loves me. I have a strong and healthy son. Gold and silver do not carry any blessing. You whites spoil the beauty of life for the possession of gold. But we always were the masters of our gold, never its slaves." ¹⁷ The chief, speaking clearly for Howard/Traven in his point of view speaks to the valuelessness of gold and also strongly brings out Traven's deep love and respect for the Indians of Mexico.

In their eventual journey to town much happens. Howard is implored by a group of Indians to come to their village to nurse back to life a young boy who has almost drowned. He goes with them, succeeds in saving the boy and becomes a great hero and medicine man to the Indians. He comes a great healer to them and

decides to live in harmony with them in their earthly paradise. He, like the Indian chief in the tale of don Manuel Rodriguez will have everything he will ever need to be happy.

Dobbs attempts to kill Curtin, leaves him for dead, but has only succeeded in wounding him. Dobbs himself is set upon by three bandits who kill him, steal his property and throws away the gold dust which they think is dirt. The gold dust blows away in the wind back to the mountains from which it came. Howard is able to “rock in Homeric laughter”¹⁸ at this for he is a man at peace with himself. Curtin is asked to join Howard as his assistance in practicing medicine for the Indians.

Howard’s discovery of the true treasure, spiritual/physical happiness, and Curtin’s potential for this discovery appear to me to be the true fulfillment of B. Traven’s concern with man’s ancient quest for identity, dignity, and freedom.”¹⁹

The unit will be divided into a series of mini lessons emphasizing central aspects such as the nature of quests, the nature of man, morality, material and spiritual value, greed and happiness. Discussion questions will accompany each mini lesson as well as the possibility of involving my students in several short writing projects on the above mentioned topics. The unit is aimed directly at students in grades 7 through 12 and will be taught over one marking period. The unit will emphasize reading comprehension and writing skill.

Lesson Plan 1

Lesson Plan for introduction to the quests.

Theme Mankind has searched throughout recorded history for objects external to himself to give his life meaning. These objects have been associated with physical, philosophical and religious powers.

Objectives After completing the Lesson students should be able:

1. To understand the historical nature of quests as they relate to the grail.
2. To have an increased understanding and appreciation of early literature dealing with quests for the grail. (Morte D’Arthur).
3. To have an increased vocabulary and writing skill.

Introductory Quests/Grail:

Teacher should explain the historical background of the grail detailing the religious and magical properties associated with it. Teacher should also present an outline detailing the nature of the quest for this object, specifically as it relates to the Knights of the Round Table.

Vocabulary Activities:

The teacher will use the following words to introduce vocabulary activities:

immortality ideal grail
soul obsession dignity
spirit transcend honor
philosophy magical reliquary
quest external ritual
religious Knight theory
amulet imagination symbol

Questions for Discussion:

1. What are the various manifestations of the grail?
How did each representation come into being?
2. What was the nature of the quest for the Knights of Round Table?
3. What is the meaning of a symbol?
How was the grail a symbol?
4. Why do men leave home in search of external objects with supposed powers? What are they looking for?
5. What in your life (student's) could you imagine questing for?

Writing Assignment:

1. Write an essay explaining something in your life you feel would be important enough to quest after?
2. Compare and contrast those men who searched for objects associated with purely physical or magical powers to those who searched for something more religious or spiritual in nature.

Activity Have the students view the movie "Excalibur". Have them compare this film to their readings of the Knights of the Round Table and develop a group discussion around this.

Lesson Plan 2

Lesson Plan for introduction to understanding the nature of gold.

Theme Gold historically has transcended its purely economic value and assumed an importance equal to magical and religious items.

Objectives Students will be able:

1. To understand the historical importance of gold, its economic and “magical value”.
2. To have an increased understanding and appreciation of the quests of the Spanish Conquistadors for gold in the New World.
3. To begin to develop an awareness of the tremendous power gold has held in man’s imagination, and as a prelude to the quest in “The Treasure of the Sierra Madre”.
4. To have an increased vocabulary and writing skill.

Introduction Teacher will explain the historical evolution of gold, form its quasi-religious nature to its present value as the primary commodity in international monetary exchange. Gold has always held an almost inexplicable hold upon man’s imagination. Discussion will be valuable introduction to “The Treasure of the Sierra Madre”.

Activities

1. *Library Activity* . The teacher will take the class to the library for the purposes of conducting additional research on the quests of the Spanish Conquistadors in the New World. Students will be expected to outline the exploits of a particular conquistador and write a brief paper detailing the nature of the quests.

Vocabulary

value monetary allure
conquistador avarice legend
God commodity enchantment
plunder fable myth

2. Students will define the above vocabulary words. Students will use the above vocabulary words correctly in sentences.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What do we mean when we say gold has transcended its purely economic value?
2. What was the difference in attitude toward gold between the Conquistadors and the Indians in the New World?
3. What are the value and allure of gold today? Are they the same or different from earlier times?

Notes

1. Arthur Edward Waite, *The Holy Grail: The Galahad Quest in Arthurian Literature* (New York: University Books 1961), p. xvii.
2. Charles H. Miller, an introduction to *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (New York, Kroph Co. 1966), p. xiii.
3. Arthur Edward Waite, *The Holy Grail: The Galahad Quest in Arthurian Literature* (New York: University Books 1961), xii.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid. p. 534.
6. Ibid., p. ix.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 534.
9. Stanton A. Coblenz, *Avarice: A History* (Washington, D.C., Public Affairs Press, 1965), p. 24.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. iii.
13. Ibid.
14. Charles H. Miller, *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties* edited by David Madden, (London: Souther Illinois University Press: Feffer & Simons Inc., 1968), p. 115.
15. B. Traven, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (New York: Hill and Wang 1967), p. 1.
16. Ibid., p. 194.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., p. 305.
19. Charles H. Miller, an introduction to *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (New York, Kroph & Co., 1968), p. xiii.

Teacher's Bibliography

Coblentz, Stanton. *Avarice: A History* Washington, D.C. Public Affairs Press, 1965.

Madden, David, editor. *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties* London: Souther Illinois University Press, Feffer & Simon Inc., 1968.

Traven, B. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* New York: Hill and Wang, 1967.

Waite, Arthur Edward. *The Holy Grail: The Galahad Quest in Arthurian Literature* New York: University Books, 1961.

Weston, Jessie L. *King Arthur and His Knights: A Survey of Arthurian Romance* New York: Ams Press, 1972.

White, T.H. *The Once and Future King* New York: Putnam & Sons, 1958.

Student's Bibliography

Traven, B. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* New York: Hill and Wang, 1967.

Weston, Jessie, L. *King Arthur and His Knights: A Survey of Arthurian Romance* New York: Ams Press 1972.

White, T.H. *The Once and Future King* New York: Putnam & Sons 1958.

Classroom Materials

Films

The Treasure of the Sierra Madne 1948 directed by John Houston, based on novel by B. Traven, videocassette.

Excalibur 1983 directed by John Bourman, based on *The Morte D'Arthur*, videocassette.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>