



## Writing through Myths

Curriculum Unit 98.02.09  
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### WHY STUDY GREEK MYTHS AND CULTURE?

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At the high school where I teach, I have heard both students and teachers ask, is it really a priority to study the myths and culture of ancient Greece? The relevance of Greek culture may be demonstrated amply, even on a short walk through New Haven. I draw an illustration from recent American history. In AD 1967, before the United States Supreme Court, arguing against segregation, law-breaking and mob-violence, in the case “Cooper vs. Aaron”, Thurgood Marshall made the point. “Education”, he argued, “is not the teaching of three R’s. Education is the teaching of overall citizenship, to learn to live together with fellow citizens, and above all, to obey the law.” The court, the law, and the notion of citizenship, as well as the ideal of education itself are Greek. Even the architecture of the building, and the city in which it stands, though handed down through the Latin of Rome and over two millennia, are emblems of the “Age of Enlightenment”, a time of renaissance, when Greek ideals of reason, symmetry, ethics, politics and philosophy all had profound influence. Thomas Jefferson, who read Greek and Latin from childhood, authored the fundamental document of American ideals, conscientiously patterning this country’s principles upon the Greek concepts of honor and citizenship. Thus to understand what it is to be an American citizen, and a citizen of the Western world, we mustn’t neglect what the Greeks thought, shaped, built and wrote.

We must begin with Homer, for he established the standard. This curriculum unit is designed around a full reading of Homer’s *Odyssey* (as well as pointed excerpts from the *Iliad*), its story, its characters, its construction as poetry, its schemes and figures, and use of myth. It is intended for high school students. Because this is primarily a course in writing, how myths are written down, and why, will always take precedence over extra-textual matters. And yet there is no way to teach the *Odyssey* without teaching about Greek culture. This unit is also about the role of Homer as an educator, whose poems are simultaneously the artful record and elementary foundation of Greek cultural ideals. The history of the study of Homer, the history of the text as a schoolbook, and the subsequent influence on many kinds of literature– these are issues that will be raised time and again as the course progresses. In addition to the *Odyssey*, students will be reading excerpts from the *Iliad*, Plato (such as “The Apology” and/or “The Allegory of the Cave”), Plutarch and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, as well as modern documents such as “The Declaration of Independence”, and Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”. Following the clerical methods of a thousand years ago, as writing students, the class will play an active role in copying, paraphrasing, imitating, analyzing through essays, and even parodying aspects of the texts. With this strong technical training serving as the fundamental basis for

the course, an integrated lesson plan periodically calling attention to historical, moral, and philosophical issues should not be beyond the stamina of the students.

## HOMER'S EPICS: A LIVING TRADITION

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The following paragraphs offer a brief discussion of the constitutive rules of the epic genre, its meter, and how Homer has been translated into English poetry over the centuries. Any attempt to teach Homer as literature leaves us humbly grateful to the Greeks for almost all of the terminology employed to describe the poems and how they work. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are both “epics”, that is, long poems constructed around the words and deeds of a hero, a man beyond mere human capabilities, not immune to “hubris” (an imbalance or grave flaw, for which he must pay) with gods playing a central, even causal role. Homer used many mythical stories from the collective past, stretching back even five hundred years. Almost immediately after they were written down, the epics themselves were regarded as myths and later poets were free to draw on Homer as upon a mythical past.

Scholars who hold to the argument that “Homer” is the name of one man, who either tied the two epics together from many shorter myths then dictated them to a scribe, or, was the scribe himself, do not fail to acknowledge that the *Iliad* is the more ancient of the two. Whether or not there was indeed one author, one author for each, or multiple authors, one must read the texts as though complete in order to understand their structure. It seems most logical to assert that one man “designed” (made, shaped or plotted) each poem, for they bear the mark of the overseeing artist’s mind, commencing “in medias res”. Both poems focus upon a much shorter actual duration of time within the larger saga, than the “Homerica”, for instance, lesser tales which fill in the missing beginnings and ends.

The *Odyssey* starts late in Odysseus’ voyage, in the present, always reflecting upon the inevitable future and the unforgettable past. Later, we are taken back to the past by Odysseus, who becomes the narrator of his journey up to that point. Even at the point of greatest tension, when all of the past and future seem to be converging upon the action of the present, we are taken on long strolls through past stories as though we had almost forgotten where we were.

The *Iliad* is a very carefully selected story, a war story boldly formed around the anger of its hero, Achilles. Details such as the actual sacking of Troy are purposefully left out, as the story focuses on its tragic hero’s behavior, rather than incorporate the far-flung details of the whole saga. Similarly, stories of the many “Returns” home from Troy are craftily included in the *Odyssey* by way of the speeches of Nestor and Menelaus and the encounters Odysseus has in the underworld, with Agamemnon and the silent Ajax. The many minor plots and adventures are recalled as condensed stories within stories, songs within songs, made subservient to the larger, unified epic movement.

Of course these two epics were constructed from an oral tradition of poetry long established, with many stories from which to draw. The singer, minstrel, harper or poet- as Demodokos, the Phaiakian harper, or Phemios, the poet spared from the wrath of Odysseus as he kills the suitors- was brought in after meals, and, if as skilled as the Homeric bard, became the center of attention and was rewarded handsomely. For in Greek society, where how you live in men’s memories is of ultimate importance, the poet was the one who preserved the glorious deeds and words, was in fact the memory of the tribe. Without the poet little would be remembered. Thus Homer’s epics were as vital to the moral education of Greek youths as the “Torah” to the

Hebrews, for within them students, soldiers, philosophers, poets, and statesmen could all find grave lessons about human limitations, about the struggle for power among men, and how the gods get their due. In these poems examples were set how properly to act.

These poets possessed stock material, which they improvised upon, mixing formulaic names and descriptions with spontaneous wordplay. Epithets served many purposes, among them, rhythmical, in that they supplied familiar, recurrent phrases which eased the speed of the narrative; stylistic, in that the constant signature of noble names and descriptions helped to elevate the tone to a constantly noble pitch; and constructive, in that the poet, while searching for the next musical phrase, might fill in the rest of the line with the formula, thereby resting briefly, and adding more power to the line's ending as a unit. This aspect left over from the oral tradition makes the written work sound odd at first to fresh ears, but intensifies, eventually, the cumulative beauty and mystery of these musical poems. No one can forget, having read the *Odyssey*, such epithets as "The wine-dark sea", or "The rosy-fingered dawn", "Gray-eyed Athena" or "Odysseus, master mariner", "resourceful Odysseus", "the cunning" and "conqueror of cities".

Rhythmically, the works of Homer are unrivaled (one lesson involves listening to the poems read on tape by an expert in Greek: the students will have the opportunity of experiencing how the Greek language sounded—its quantities, stresses and pitch). Never less than masterful poems, they were written in dactylic hexameter the traditional epic meter, and the same meter which would be used by Apollonius of Rhodes and Theocritus. It would be adapted to Latin by, among others, Virgil. The dactylic hexameter line consists of six feet, a foot being the smallest unit of metrical measurement, comprising, in the case of the dactyl, three syllables, one long followed by two shorts. Poets composing in English may manipulate quantity, but our meter is based on accent, rather than the length of time needed to pronounce each sound. An accentual dactyl in English would be "history" or "everywhere" or "Mulligan". The hexameter line is composed, theoretically, of six dactyls; in practice it has four or five dactyls with one or two spondees substituted, either in the third, and/or more often, the last foot of the line. A spondee is comprised of two long syllables, which took approximately the same time to pronounce as one long and two shorts. Scansion allows us to make notations. The dactyl would look like this: ' ; the spondee, like this: ' '. Thus a dactyl hexameter line with a spondee substituted in the last foot would be scanned like this: ' ' ' ' ' ' ' '. An equivalent line in English would be:

"Lexington Avenue trains run express, irrepressibly, downtown."

The accents here are on 'Lex', 'ave', 'trains', 'press', 'down', 'town'. This example also uses alliteration (repeating the "n" sound), a device employed in Homer's Greek as well, in such an epithet as "pater andron te theon te" ("father of men and gods both"), where the "th" sound was really a hard "t" sound. One notable American example of dactylic hexameter is Longfellow's "Evangeline", which often suffers, as do other experiments here and there throughout the history of English prosody, from too cumbersome a line. To read the experiments of, say, Thomas Campion, or Robert Bridges, shows how English demands a quicker, shorter line, more definite in its accentuation. The line in English which seems best equipped to render Homer's rapidity of movement, including many run-ons, or enjambments, counterpointed against the consistent meter, is unrhymed iambic pentameter, otherwise known as blank verse. This line was made immortal by Shakespeare in Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy, and Marc Antony's eulogy "Friends, Romans, Countrymen..." in Julius Caesar. An example would be:

“The trains below the street will never cease.”

The scansion would look like this: -'-'-'-'', with the accents on ‘trains’, ‘low’, ‘street’, ‘nev’, ‘cease’. A fair example of a blank verse translation is William Cullen Bryant’s. Alexander Pope’s version of the Iliad has maintained currency in English for more than two centuries. It was composed in heroic couplets, that is, iambic pentameter lines rhymed in rigid pairs. More recent translations have adopted a looser principle of construction, such as Robert Fitzgerald’s, which employs a flexible line with five beats, that is five noticeable accents, with a variable number of syllables unaccented. This translation, with respect to the dynamic qualities and unique demands of the English language, is very powerful, quite readable and exciting to both the beginner and expert alike. He even echoes Pound, Yeats and Shelley, poets familiar to readers in English. The *Odyssey* has been translated into many different meters in English and into prose, as well.

That this look into the varieties of meter not be in vain, I offer a quick series of examples how differently the same lines have been rendered in English over the years. The lines are from Book XI of the *Odyssey*. Perhaps this sample, and some brief comments, will offer a glimpse at the various ways Homer has been perceived, and show how a long tradition can contain many differences of opinion.

“Much I importun’d then the weak-neck’d dead,  
And vow’d, when I the barren soil should tread  
Of cliffy Ithaca, amidst my hall  
To kill a heifer, my clear best of all,  
And give in off’ring, on a pile compos’d  
Of all the choice goods my whole house enclos’d  
And to Tiresias himself, alone  
A sheep coal-black, and the selectest one  
Of all my flocks.”

This is the work of George Chapman, an Elizabethan. He translated the poems into rhymed iambic pentameter couplets, which, compared to the later heroic couplets of Pope, are rhythmically fluid and volatile. Here’s the Augustan Pope’s rendering, written in the early eighteenth century:

“Now the wan shades we hail, th’ infernal Gods,  
To speed our course, and waft us o’er the floods,

So shall a barren heifer from the stall  
Beneath the knife upon your altars fall:  
So in our palace, at our safe return  
Rich with unnumber'd gifts the Pyle shall burn;  
So shall a Ram, the largest of the breed,  
Black as these regions, to Tiresias bleed."

The unmistakably balanced pace of these couplets is the signature of Pope's style; they produce in us anticipation for the inevitable rhyme at each line's end. There are many fewer enjambments than in Chapman. What is sacrificed in rapidity and fluidity is made up for in stateliness and balance. Already we see how diction can vary, and it varies further as we look at the American English version written by Bryant, a century later:

"Then I offered prayer  
Fervently to that troop of airy forms,  
And made a vow that I would sacrifice,  
When I at last should come to Ithaca,  
A heifer without blemish, barren yet,  
In my own courts, and heat the altar-pyre  
With things of price, and to the seer alone,  
Tiresias, by himself, a ram whose fleece  
Was wholly black, the best of all my flocks."

The clarity is remarkable, the blank verse often less than remarkable, but it proves, perhaps, better suited to the unrhymed lines of Homer. Since the time of Pope much had been revealed about the Greek of Homer. The Venetian manuscript with its full scholia had been made available. A great boom in the appreciation of Greek had followed on the footsteps of Pope, so that Bryant had much more available to him in the way of solid

scholarship.

The next translation comes from Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. This epic poem commences with the underworld scene from Book XI, although Pound did not use the Greek as his source for this translation. Rather, he rendered his version from the Renaissance Latin of Andreas Divus, a scholar of the 16th century. Pound gives his translation a touch of the accentual/alliterative heritage of earlier English verse. He also condenses the lines into a brief, but loaded, four lines:

“Then prayed I many a prayer to the sickly death’s-heads;  
As set at Ithaca, sterile bulls of the best  
For sacrifice, heaping the pyre with goods,  
A sheep to Tiresias only, black and a bell-sheep.”

We can sense here the presence of both Chapman and Bryant, but also something else, a living condensation in English quite poetic in its own right, far from the staid, slower paced version of Pope, more eclectic, but also quite spare. The last two versions are by the most popular twentieth century verse translators, the first by the Poundian Robert Fitzgerald, the second, by Richmond Lattimore. Fitzgerald aimed for poetry in English, with a quicker, shorter, more agile line, while Lattimore's line is longer, heavier, visually and quantitatively closer to the original Greek.

“Then I addressed the blurred and breathless dead,  
vowing to slaughter my best heifer for them  
before she calved, at home in Ithaka,  
and burn the choice bits on the altar fire;  
as for Teiresias, I swore to sacrifice  
a black lamb, handsomest of all our flock.”

That's Fitzgerald: quick, clear, literal, jammed with the signature one-syllable words which keep English clean and riveting. Now, Lattimore:

“I promised many times to the strengthless heads of the perished  
dead that, returning to Ithaka, I would slaughter a barren

cow, my best, in my palace, and pile the pyre with treasures,  
and to Teiresias apart would dedicate an all-black  
ram, the one conspicuous in all our sheep flocks.”

Every translator knows, and every reader, student and teacher alike, should know, there is more than one way to skin a cat. In many high schools students are given watered-down, simplified, prose versions of the *Odyssey* to read. It is no surprise many of them remember only names and events, and can say nothing about the experience of reading a verse epic from beginning to end. Sophomores in high school need to be challenged. Although contemplation of the variety of ways to translate may be too challenging for some, at first, I am certain that it is never too early to expose them to the uncertainty involved in what they otherwise assume was written in stone. There is very little time for a passive reading. They need to be aware as they read. Consider the numerous descriptions of the shades out of Erebus, the dead, hungry for blood, to whom Odysseus promises a sacrifice. Homer has Odysseus describe them with the words “ameneina kareina,” which, as we see, may be translated in many ways. The essential meaning of the first is “weak, fleeting.” The second means “summits” or “heads”. They are called the “weak-neck’d dead” by Chapman; the “wan shades” by Pope; the “troop of airy forms” by Bryant; and the “strengthless heads of the perished dead” by Lattimore. Lattimore shows precision and great fidelity to the Greek preserving Homer’s lines intact, but no doubt “perished dead” is redundant, despite the need for rhythm. Fitzgerald’s “ blurred and breathless” offers a curious contrast with the “wan shades” and “airy forms” of Pope and Bryant respectively. Pound and Lattimore both mention “heads”, but Chapman mentions their “weak necks”. Wan, airy, weak, blurred and breathless, sickly, strengthless: the point is clear, they are lifeless shades, fleshless ghosts, not solid bodies. We must step back and appreciate the historical, as well as aesthetical, value of such different wordings, each with the stamp of its own time’s terms and concerns, and the individual translator’s perception of, and fidelity to, the original.

Aside from its metrical composition, the Homeric epic uses many rhetorical schemes and figures of speech to condense its concentrated meaning. We see synesthesia (silver voiced); synecdoche (many glad hearts); personification (Ate, the force that brings ruin upon men, for instance, among others, or Athena, who stands for intelligence itself) and most notably, simile, a form of simile known as “epic simile”, wherein an extended comparison is drawn between one thing and another. Thus we may read, to use a generic example, that just as an eagle falls upon its prey, diving at terrible speed, taking it by surprise, killing it instantly, so the warrior fell upon his foe, who never knew what hit him. Epic similes in Homer may run a line or two, or go on for even dozens of lines. Each draws an analogy, enhancing the image of the moral by a comparison between the action at hand and some other vivid action familiar to us from the workings of nature. Such similes may serve as a brief respite from the relentless battle or journey, painting a vivid, exhilarating picture. They may also serve as a means of foreshadowing some terrible, monumental event to come, or remind us of some significant event in the past.

## MYTH IN THE ODYSSEY AND THE ODYSSEY AS MYTH

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The term “myth” has been defined in many ways. Ernst Cassirer asserted that myth is a perspective, that all “knowledge” involves a “synthesizing activity of the mind into ‘the key of myth’”. Thus myth is a way of seeing. This has a broad applicability, susceptible to abuse. The notion that myth and poetry cross over, primitive language and craft of culture combined, that celebration and participation have always played a role, is asserted both by anthropological evidence and linguistic research. The use of personification, for instance, summons up both the ancient, primitive poetry of language and the sublime, cultivated language of poetry. In this unit we will follow Aristotle’s conception of “mythos” as a “narration”, or piece of a story, which is told for edification (such as in the *Iliad*, Book IX, where Phoenix tells of Meleager, attempting to sway Achilles from his stubbornness; or in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus’ encounter with Agamemnon, forewarning him of what he may find at home). In the *Odyssey* myths are told which serve as lessons, as standards and examples, to the characters. Telemachus is implicitly and explicitly compared to Orestes, the justified avenger. Bird signs and omens charge the moral structure. Helen’s fair reading of the good omen in an eagle snatching up a goose creates in Telemachus a new courage, and serves to make the bloody destiny of the suitors inevitably justified by heaven. Similarly, the stranger Theoklymenos foresees the end, and Penelope also has a dream interpretable in no other way. The *Odyssey*, as a work which in a masterly way handles such turns, has never failed to serve the same role, as mythical example, to the poets of Greece, Rome, Europe and the New World, whose cultures cannot be separated from the seminal culture of Homer.

Few students do not know the definition of a “role model”, though few may be able to cite an example of a good one. The need for sound role models reveals the need for myths with heroes who embody more than athletic prowess, although such prowess may be an ingredient in the role-model formula. Whatever the role model must be, he must embody the heroic ideals of his culture. He must stand for its highest achievements. For the Greeks, the heroes from Homer’s two epics, Achilles and Odysseus, were exemplary representatives. For Greek writers, the works themselves became models for poetic achievement. This was the case because Homer embodied in his heroes the ideals of a culture, the excellence, the virtue, the actions and deeds, for which they used the word “arete”. In Homer’s heroes, as Werner Jaeger states it, they had a “common fund” from which to draw examples for moral edification.

Education is more than instruction in technical matters and traditions. It includes the rules by which we live together as social animals, the rules of civilization, which means moral lessons. Greek heroes and poets alike were judged by the toughest standards of duty. Since the notion of “arete” originated in the class of aristocratic warriors, it included, at first, “military virtues” such as courage and honor in battle. The hero’s goal is to be remembered for his glorious deeds, preserved by the poet, the poet’s to be remembered for his glorious words. In Book VIII of the *Odyssey*, listening to the song of Demodokos, an allegorical name, for he is the preserver in poetry of the glory and deeds of the people, Odysseus hears of Troy and his lost companions and begins to weep. A little later, the heavy-hearted Odysseus is challenged to a match with the discus. Though worn out and saddened, he still manages to summon enough pluck from his anger to win the contest. And soon thereafter he is called to tell the story of what brought him to Phaiakia. So, despite the nine years lost at sea he remains fierce as his reputation, never ceasing all the while to be noble in form and behavior, quick-witted and with a crafty tongue. As we reflect on his grief, endure with him the distance he must go, we see him both deeply human, a humble man deserving sympathy, and coldly calculating. Never doubting for a moment his ability to kill the suitors, we see him planning, in the end, thinking on nothing but revenge. Within the one man, most civilized of men, contend the forces of ancient brutality.



The presence of Demodokos, the lavish gifts promised Odysseus, the great meal and quarters, all create the proper image of an aristocratic culture, shared by men from far lands and near, with a definite code of moral behaviour. Civilization is clearly marked in contrast against mere barbarism. Take for example the episode of Book IX, where he and his men encounter the ungovernable Cyclops, a mythical one-eyed monster, son of Poseidon. As we follow Odysseus' narration of events we learn he takes with him twelve of his best fighters and a goatskin of wine. Unexpectedly, Odysseus takes about a dozen lines to explain from where the wine came. It was, he says, that "sweet liquor that Euanthes' son, Maron" had given him. Maron "kept Apollo's holy grove at Ismaros". It turns out Odysseus received it as a gift there along with many other fineries, and that the wine's potency is such that it may be mixed with water, one part to twenty. It is wine no servant ever tasted, which no man could turn down. At first this might seem like a superfluous detail, or merely an ornamental enhancement, but Odysseus states, describing the situation in retrospect, that he knew they would encounter a man "all outward power, a wild man, ignorant of civility". The first thing we learn about the Cyclops, from his own mouth, is that he has no fear of the gods, no respect for the rules of hospitality shared by civilized folks, nor, as we may infer, does he cultivate the vine. This episode serves as a dark memory in Odysseus vast journey, but stands for us as a shining example of the premium put upon intelligence in the story and the necessity of the rules of hospitality which govern the interactions between strangers. Needless to say, the cannibalistic, uncouth Cyclops is not a good host and it takes all of the ingenuity Odysseus can summon to escape with his life and the lives of his few remaining uneaten men. Two things make their escape possible: Odysseus's intelligence and the wine. But the wine, as we see, is no longer simply the wine. The wine was a gift from a civilized, pious host to a noble guest, and as such, used to outsmart the uncivilized, despotic barbarian, comes to symbolize civilization itself, the cultivation of the vine, and the respectful interaction between noble strangers.

This lesson of how to act properly towards strangers, how to be a guest and how to be a host, is maintained throughout the epic. It is one of the primary motivations for the entire work. We see Telemachus abusively mistreated by the heedless suitors, the epitome of bad houseguests; then we see how well he is treated at the courts of Nestor and Menelaus. This dialectical relationship between what is proper in the eyes of the gods, honoring them with ceremony and sacrifice, and the scornful barbarity which deprives them of their due, comprises the moral structure. It is this dialectic, reinforced by the use of divine intervention and foreshadowing, which makes the consequences inevitable. It is this sense of justice which would be developed further in Athens, by Aeschylus, and later, by Plato and Aristotle.

Digressing for a moment to consider local applications of the notion that the vine stands symbolically for civilization, consider the seal of the city of New Haven, or the seal and motto of the state of Connecticut. Both contain direct reference to the cultivation of the vine as a signature of civilization. The seal of the city of New Haven, designed by two key enlightened personalities of the Revolutionary period, Ezra Stiles and James Hillhouse, depicts a ship at the entrance of the harbor, and an Ionic pillar entwined with a grape vine. The motto of the state of Connecticut is "qui transtulit sustinet", faithfully translated by Webster's as "He who transplanted (it) sustains (it)". Of the resonant Greek influence on all of the Western world, Jaeger writes: "Insofar as it is not the history of one particular nation but of a group of nations to which, physically and intellectually we belong, our history still begins with the Greeks". And considering the Hellenic synthesis of Mandelstam in Russian, Joseph Brodsky remarked: "Civilization is the sum total of different cultures animated by a common spiritual numerator, and its main vehicle- speaking both metaphorically and literally- is translation. The wandering of a Greek portico into the latitude of the tundra is a translation." A portico, an ionic pillar: the vine is the living symbol which hangs upon these traces of architecture.

Homer, like the transplanted vine, has served in many places, under a fabulous array of climates. The works

have never ceased to be recognized, even when the original was not available. Dante knew perhaps only the 1st century AD Latin epitome of the *Iliad*, relying on the word of Virgil. Virgil, of course, supplied the fame (but not, as noted by Arnold, the speedy style), while for centuries there was no actual text to be read. An intriguing, and quite funny, comparison may be made between the gravity of the actual speeches in Book IX of the *Iliad* and the portrayal by Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida*. Here we find only a kind of farcical caricature of the original, a parity of situations, but a parody of the tragic implications. The play (later “translated” by Dryden) was more influenced by Chaucer and the chivalrous *Romance of Troy* than the *Iliad* itself.

The text was- as has been determined from the references made by ancient authors, and scholia on later manuscripts- roughly the way we have it, by the time of Solon (638-557 BC). The expurgation of spurious passages from variant manuscripts was carried out by the librarians in Alexandria, who also put the two poems into twenty-four books each, one chapter for each letter of the Greek alphabet. Papyri exist intact from that period, recovered from the sand. The manuscript relied upon by modern scholars came to Venice in the 10th century- perhaps Dante had heard of this manuscript? Curtius explains: “To see European literature as a whole is possible only after one has acquired citizenship in every period from Homer to Goethe... one acquires the rights of citizenship in the country of European literature only when one has spent many years in each of its provinces and has frequently moved about from one to another”. Very few could attain such a citizenship, which is more Roman than Greek, but certainly it makes the point about the structural necessity of Homer in any student’s curriculum. Despite the positivistic longing for multiculturalism, neglecting to teach Homer to any American public school student- raised in a country so founded upon Greek and Roman cultural principles- in favor of more recent literature, from wherever it may come, seems partial and dubious. Homer’s myths built an entire world of reference upon which later literature has for centuries depended. Myths are woven into a complex fabric of lessons, a structure of continuous comparison between justice and injustice, and sustained reflection upon human destiny in the face of nearly insurmountable odds. Homer’s lessons to poets have surfaced as allusions ever since. Unless one would abandon Western Civilization altogether, Homer must remain central to the writing curriculum. And yet, as mentioned above, Homer has been periodically neglected. It is as much as to say to a student of English literature, after an objective account of the history of poetry in English, that he need never peruse the King James translation of the Bible. No issue of religion or ideology should serve to isolate a student from the heritage he may choose on his own to disregard after he has studied it. The last few centuries have witnessed an enormous reversion to Homer initiated by their largest literary figures: Keats, Arnold, Tennyson, Yeats, Joyce, Pound, Auden and many others.

## STRATEGIES

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First of all, students will be inducted into the class as neophyte ‘scribes” and informed of the glorious future which awaits them as writers, by their pursuit of literature. Second, before the class commences with Homer, we will spend a day or two going over the background of the epics, covering some history, the outlines of the basic story, and a discussion about the development of the Greek language. This will be brief but will provide them with enough information to get started. More context and background will be supplied as we proceed through the text.

Although the technological devices available in the classroom can be seductive, this class will rely on the

erstwhile technology of the book, pen and paper. I see less and less actual classtime spent reading books closely, aloud, or copying texts by hand, or reciting what has been learned by heart. The strategies of this class will rely more on the guidelines set down by medieval scholasticism than more recent, electronically enhanced methods (though a tape-recorder will come in handy).

This curriculum unit will be woven into a course on the fundamentals of writing. To write well most of the students need to learn to read better. Speaking well, reading well and writing well are closely related. The classical formula proceeds from reading aloud and copying down, to memorizing, then rewriting to detect errors, analysis of the construction, diction and detection of figures of speech. These roughly correspond to the basic five divisions of rhetoric which may be adapted to the needs of this unit: 1) Invention. 2) Disposition. 3) Diction. 4) Memory. 5) Delivery.

Delivery has to do with reading aloud. Although much of the reading for the course will be done outside of school, all reading in the classroom will be heard, with special attention paid to pronunciation and enunciation. Many Greek words are at first quite intimidating. I foresee that through constant exposure and constant practice, student confidence and ability will rise to the occasion. Quintilian writes that each student must always strive to learn, and use in speaking, as many new words as he can, and quotes Cicero from *On the Nature of the Gods* : “ Even words which have seemed harsh at first become softened by use.”

Memory is the mother of the muses, the essential ingredient of poetry. Memorization is something students will have to practice. They will be required to memorize a particular passage from Homer, the names of characters, literary terminology and unfamiliar vocabulary words. Weekly quizzes should keep them from straying too far from the mind-maintenance they will need to excel.

Diction, or word-choice, plays a vital role in good writing, vital to its style and substance. A student’s awareness of the many words available to describe any one thing will be dramatically enhanced by close examination of select passages, variously translated. Students will be required to write paraphrases of their reading, wherein they will need to find words which convey meanings as close to the original as possible, but with none of the same words. They will examine readings from the past and attempt to update them by rewriting them in contemporary language. They will also be faced with such assignments as coming up with a handful of synonyms for each word in a particular passage.

Disposition may be detected, or conveyed, by reading closely. Students must ask what the writer’s tone is, his attitude towards his material and subject, and the particular value of his perspective. They must consider for what audience, situation, period or occasion the work was intended.

Invention in great poetic works is something young students may be able to perceive, but they are not up to such a level that they can contextualize a work’s inventiveness, so as to say one great work is more inventive than another. Invention will play a role in their own work, but it will be invention within the confines of certain assignments. They will be asked to reinvent an episode or write a parody, or an imitation. They will create mock-heroes and fanciful epithets. They will be asked to write their own poems upon certain prescribed topics, such as the topos of the ideal landscape. Just prior to the Cyclops episode, Odysseus and his men land on an island of great natural beauty, a lovely place which reveals a very early use of the conventional “locus amoenus”, the “ pleasant” landscape. We read of “lush/ well-watered meads along the shore, vines in profusion.” There, he and his men enjoy a relaxing day of hunting and eating, temporarily worriless. This motif of the “lovely place” is familiar from the such examples as the “Garden of Eden” in the Bible, the eclogues of Theocritus and eventually in such epitomized landscape designs as “The Snow Man”, where Wallace Stevens gives us a different sort of lovely place. We will take a moment to contemplate the reality of such places as

groves, forests, gardens and parks (like Central Park, designed, but “natural”).

Reading through the *Odyssey*, students will also come to recognize the elements of characterization and plot. There will be discussions of the effectiveness and ubiquity, throughout literature (and in films) of journey motifs and the quest for self-realization. This link is vital, for their journey through the book will be one of increasing awareness. They will consider themselves journeyman scribes on the road to enlightenment, as we digress after the Cyclops episode to consider some parallel texts also involving a cave, and the struggle of enlightenment against the barbaric tyranny of ignorance – that is, the already mentioned “Allegory of the Cave” from Plato’s *Republic* (with the assertion that of all things in life, the pursuit of the good is most difficult) and “The Declaration of Independence” where Jefferson writes that it is the tendency of humans to endure oppression rather than throw off their chains.

## LESSON PLANS

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This is just a sample of a few of the many exercises and activities arising from a study of writing revolving around Greek myths and culture.

### **First Lesson:**

The first lesson should involve the students in reading, writing and speaking about the text in a collective lesson. The teacher should choose a passage of about 10-15 lines from the *Odyssey*, lines the teacher finds edifying, vivid, intriguing, or interesting in any way. One recommendation would be the introductory lines invoking the muse and summarizing the epic to follow. Next, the teacher should find a handful of other translations of the same passage, translations of various periods and styles (see above). Students should be given a copy of each.

The teacher will proceed to ask individual students to read each translation aloud. Once this has been accomplished, the teacher should open a controlled discussion of the various word choices and the impression left by the choice of line, rhythm, etc. General remarks should cite details.

The next step is to make a choice between all of the translations to focus on one in particular. How the choice is made is up to the teacher and students, but for the purposes of this exercise, a difficult version would be best, such as Chapman’s.

Once a translation has been chosen, the students should proceed to write it down verbatim in their own script. They must copy the text exactly as it is written. Mistakes will be marked with a red pen, points docked, etc.

The next step is collective. The teacher will ask the students to translate the passage into clear, modern diction, accurate in meaning, perhaps even poetically sonorous, but they may not use any of the words from the version they are “translating.” This may take more than one day. It involves word by word analysis, with the teacher at the board writing down the choices made by the students. The teacher should be very exacting. If students propose words that do not quite fit, the teacher should constructively identify the differences in connotation, giving hints here and there where appropriate. Teachers should pay special attention to insure a correct reading of the syntax.

The assignment will be evaluated once students hand in both the accurate manuscript and the new

translation.

Last, but certainly not least, the students will be required to memorize the passage. For this exercise, the individual students may choose from among the handful of translations given out earlier. Preferences will make for variation. Upon the deadline for memorization students will be required both to recite the passage and accurately write it down.

To ground this lesson in specific words, the teacher should select ten or so vital words with their synonyms, to be studied by the students for a quiz. Some literary terms will need to be discussed, such as epic, episode, dactylic hexameter, simile, hero, epithet, journey motif, etc.

This lesson demonstrates the essential method, with numerous variations, which will be used to teach this unit.

### **Second Lesson:**

This lesson should prove more “fun” to the students, for it involves more creativity. Students will be asked to select a passage from the *Odyssey* that they particularly enjoy. The passage should be from 15-30 lines, more or less. The assignment will be to write an arrangement of that passage as a new poem. The poem may be better termed a variation or imitation.

As an introduction to the poem the students will write a few paragraphs on the passage they chose, why they chose it, what about the passage attracted them, what do they imagine it means in the context of the larger epic, etc. They may focus on a theme, a character, some imagery, dialogue, a song within a song, a foreshadowing, etc. Any episode may be condensed or expanded. A wonderful lesson may be found in W.H. Auden’s *Shield of Achilles* , for instance.

I offer as an example a variation I composed on the descent of Hermes from Olympus, bringing the message to Calypso that Odysseus must at last be allowed to leave. Homer provides a vivid description of his air and seaborne journey. The lines may be found on pages 82 and 83 of Fitzgerald’s translation, Book 5.

Hermes straps on sandals of gold, winged  
To fly with round the spheres of god & man;  
Bearing purposes, his proposals show him  
Where he wants to be, surreptitiously,  
At once. Sleepwalkers waken confused, talk  
To themselves aloud, walk off unaware,  
While a wary few know the gain he supplies,  
For paths of his courses pain resources,  
Properly to name, miraculous as  
He is. He’s a gull in scaled-down fishflesh,  
Upon a fish which flies above the froth  
Of a school, like a wish, then he thrusts him-  
Self awash through pipes, surfs the crashing jumps  
Of wave, free as a dolphin, a porpoise  
Prey to no one, enveloped by the sea.  
Submarine, he torpedoed to the surface,

Erupts out of the ocean as he rises  
Upon surfcrash crests, divides with his will  
Each rush, shocking with his walk the shore's ground,  
Solidity, the beach & seawall, un-  
Scathed, to the opening of her cave's mouth.

This poem plays with the imagery of the original, enhancing the texture of sight and sound bound together like the sky and sea in the passage. The mysterious power of Hermes may be looked at from an allegorical distance, or examined for the use of alliteration, assonance, metaphor and simile, and the use of blank verse.

Particular passages of interest will present themselves as the class progresses through the *Odyssey*. Teachers should evaluate student efforts by considering their creativity, the understanding they convey through their poem, the presentation, and the overall amount of work reflected in the composition. Sentence structure and spelling should be marked closely with a red pen. Suggestions & constructive criticisms should be worded as objectively as possible. Focus should be on the poem itself and the words used.

### **Third Lesson:**

This lesson will extend over the entire course of the unit. Once a week a pair of students will stand at the podium and give presentations on selections from the reading. For instance, on Monday of week 1 students A and B each offer ten-minute presentations on Chapter I. The next Monday, students C and D offer presentations on Chapter 2, and so on.

The teacher should make the order random or alphabetical, but certainly there should be an inflexible, definite order, pre-published in the syllabus so that students are aware of their assigned time. The presentations should start in the second week of class, after a preliminary week of introductory presentations on various topics by the teacher. The teacher should give an example of what is expected. There are countless topics fertile for investigation, issues of theme, character development, geography and history, genre, figurative language, use of foreshadowing through bird signs, hospitality, the role of disguises, etc.

The course should allow for each student to do at least one presentation, if not a few. The presentations should be formally composed and handed in after they are presented. They should include general information about the topic, quotes from the text where the topic may be found, and at least one use of critical authority.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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### Teachers:

-Arnold, Matthew. *On Translating Homer*. Edited by W.H.D. Rouse. AMS Press, 1971. This study is a fine example of textual analysis, as well as an extremely informative survey of the history of Homeric translations in English.

-Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton, 1953. The first essay in this book, "Odysseus' Scar", makes invaluable distinctions between the Greek epic's portrayal of reality and the portrayal of reality in the book of Genesis.

-Bryant, William Cullen. *Trans. of the Odyssey*. Boston, 1879. This translation has moments of great richness. Bryant was considered the father of American poetry, back in the nineteenth century. He was certainly the father of the American Homer.

-Curtius, Ernst Robert. *European Literature & the Latin Middle Ages*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton, 1953. This book is about more than what the title indicates. Teachers may discover the methods of teaching and studying, the curricula, the standards, and countless other aspects of the period linking our modern world to that of the ancients.

-Frankel, Hermann. *Early Greek Poetry & Philosophy*. Trans. Hadas & Willis. HBJ, New York, 1962. Chapter 2, section G, p. 85-93 focuses on the evolution of Odysseus.

-Fyfe, W.H. *Trans. Longinus: On the Sublime*. Revised by Donald Russell. Harvard, 1995. Part of the Loeb Classics series. This famous treatise on literature pays special attention to Homer. Offering five points essential to the sublime, it goes on to cite Homer in many examples.

-Griffin, Jasper. *Editor of Homer: Iliad, Book 9*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995. A very astute look into the makings of the famous speech of Achilles to Odysseus, Ajax, and Phoenix.

-Jaeger, Werner. *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, Vol. 1*. Trans. Gilbert Highet. Oxford, 1965. Of all the books to read, this one must not be missed. He presents an overview of the ideals of education and the development of character in the days of Homer and beyond, focusing on each step of evolution towards the concepts of justice and the polis so influential on our own time and government.

-Kirk, G.S. *The Songs of Homer*. Cambridge, 1962. A rich source of information derived from archeology, as well as literary scholarship. Kirk is very thorough in his analysis of the transition from an oral to a written culture, from the rich culture of Mycenae,

through the “dark” ages of Greece, to Homer’s day and what followed.

-Mack, Maynard. Editor of the *Iliad & Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Alexander Pope. Yale, 1967. This edition offers countless insights into the historical perceptions of Homer in English.

-Preminger, Alex. Editor of *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics*. Princeton, 1974. This encyclopedia consists of informative entries written by expert contributors. The entries for such topics as myth, metaphor, Greek poetry, epic, etc. are thoroughly informative, with helpful bibliographies for further study. It is a very reliable place to start for general information. Students at the high school level should be able to digest an entry, with guidance.

-Steiner, George. Editor of *Homer in English*. Penguin, 1996. This book is an anthology of attempts in English to translate and/or imitate Homer, over five hundred years of the English language. Many passages are represented by three, four, or even five different translators, whose periods and styles may be contrasted fruitfully.

-Taplin, Oliver. *Homeric Soundings: The Shaping of the Iliad*. Clarendon, Oxford, 1992. A contemporary classicist uses the poetic shadings of contemporary poets such as Heaney and Walcott to flesh out the poetic uniqueness of Homer’s craft.

-Watson, John Selby. Trans. *Quintilian: On the Early Education of the Citizen-Orator*. Edited by James. J. Murphy. Bobbs-Merrill, 1965. Quintilian’s proscriptions for the effective education of a citizen are still extremely relevant to our own educational challenges. In a time of declining literacy, a return to the principles of learning how to speak, read, memorize and write could do a great deal of good, Quintilian did not separate these disciplines so much as he focused on their essential interconnectedness. His advice is practical and pointed.

-Wright, G.M., & Jones, P.V. Trans. *Homer: German Scholarship in Translation*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997. Each one of the essays selected for this book stands out as brilliant in its field of inquiry. In particular, the essay “The Songs of Ares & Aphrodite: On the Relationships between the Odyssey & The Iliad” by Walter Burkert, should be useful in getting a better sense of the textual similarities & echoes between the first epic and the second. We begin to see that Homer was not just an educational influence on poets who came after, but Homer also had an influence on Homer. That is, the Odyssey alludes to its elder, the Iliad.

### **Students:**

-Fitzgerald, Robert. Trans. *The Odyssey*. New York, Doubleday, 1961. This translation is a classic in its own right. No other translation presents the full stride of the story as a rhythmical, poetic event, in language both simple to understand and exhilaratingly “Homeric”. Many agree that it is the best version for teaching.

-Lattimore, Richmond. Trans. *The Iliad*. Chicago, 1951. The translator’s introduction offers many insights into Homer’s period, identity, language, art, and more. The translation, in its syntax and diction, may be a bit more difficult than Fitzgerald’s, at least to the average student, but there is no truer rendering. Pope’s may be used in contrast, for a few lines here and there, and in specific lessons aimed at comprehension of poetic structures like antithesis, meter, rhyme, etc.

-Starr, Chester G. *The Ancient Greeks*. Oxford, 1971. A fine look at the whole of Greek culture, designed as an introduction for students

-Steiner, George, & Fagles, Robert. Editors of *Homer: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice-Hall, 1962. The range of essays and poems represented in this book is very convenient. The organization is rather unpretentious, and less intimidating than most works of scholarship. The first essay, by Steiner, and the last, by Fagles, offer overviews. Contributors include Tolstoy, Pound, Auerbach, W.B. Stanford, Cedric Whitman. The book also includes some contemporary poems based on Homeric themes, by Lowell, Auden & Snodgrass, among others. This book would serve as a good companion to any student’s journey through Homer.



## Materials

Classroom materials will remain simple: pens, paper, texts, and a dictionary.

## NOTES

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(All books contained in one of the two bibliographies are referred to here by the author's last name in italics. You may refer back to the bibliographies, which are in alphabetical order by the author's last name. Books in the notes not mentioned in the bibliography are cited fully in the notes.)

1 An architectural walking tour through downtown New Haven & Yale is easily planned. Even a little more than an hour suffices to show the students numerous examples of Greek influence on buildings of all kinds, civic, university, and private. In addition to these buildings, the Sterling Memorial & Beinecke Libraries both offer glimpses at a great wealth of books, and an architecture monumentally dedicated to their preservation. One beautiful point for comparison is the corner of High & Grove. There one can see examples of Greek, as well as Egyptian, neo-classical French, medieval gothic, & modern styles of architecture. Students I have taken to see these sights have always responded with vigorous intellectual curiosity, given a modicum of explanation.

2 See Jaeger. Jaeger offers a thorough discussion of Greek education, justice, and the use of Homer. His book is a classic, an essential to the study of Greek literature and culture.

3 Curtius offers a brilliant investigation into the way ancient literature survived through the "dark" ages. The works of Greece did not survive in a vacuum. The clerics & scholars who bridged the gap between the last days of Rome, and the Renaissance, a thousand years later, left their mark on our perception of literature and our methods of study. The use of examples from the classics as authorities extends the continuous link to the example set by Homer. Those who followed Homer's example, Virgil in particular, became the authorities. Even when the link to Homer was not direct, there was a link by authority.

4 For further information on the development of the Homeric epic consult Wright. This book offers close analyses of the influence of the Iliad on the Odyssey, the nature of epic similes, and the structural aspects of key speeches, and should prove helpful to the teacher wishing to dig deeper into elements of composition.

5 See Kirk for a discussion of the pre-Homeric influences on Homer, including archeological evidence from and consideration of Mycenae.

6 See both Kirk and Griffin

7 See the famous essay by Auerbach

8 For further elaboration of the role of epithets see Lattimore's introduction to his Translation of the Iliad, or the introduction to Griffin. Griffin's book, though focused on the ninth book of the Iliad, offers a very insightful overview of Homeric scholarship, including an extremely helpful look at pre-Homeric influences on the both epics.

9 I refer to the tape & accompanying booklet entitled "The Pronunciation of Ancient Greek: A Practical Guide" by Stephen Daitz.

10 We see in Lattimore's translation an hexameter line, in that it has six stresses, but it would not be accurate in a strict sense to call it "dactylic" hexameter. Lattimore plays loosely with two & three syllable feet. The line does, as a counterpoint, resemble the Greek, both in appearance, & rhythm, when at its best.

11 In his famous essay On Translating Homer, Matthew Arnold challenged future translators to render Homer without rhyme. He

wanted something noble throughout, and he wanted an English hexameter line worthy of Homer. He did not dismiss blank verse, only Miltonic blank verse, for Homer must be forward moving, & speedy. Richmond Lattimore's Iliad answers the call for an hexameter line, Robert Fitzgerald's Odyssey answers Arnold's challenge with a durable five-beat line. For a look at the value of Fitzgerald's translation see the final essay, "Epilogue: Homer & the Writers" by Robert Fagles, from the collection of essays edited by Fagles and Steiner (listed under student bibliography).

12 For a wide variety of translations and their sources see "Homer in English" edited by Steiner. The book is a good starting point for comparing various translations of a particular passage. The bibliography is especially useful. It lists printings of the translations I have selected, and many more.

13 Chapman, George Trans. The Odysseys of Homer. New York, Scribner's (Date?)

14 See the scholarly edition of Pope's Homer edited by Mack for information on Pope's understanding of Homer, and the scholarship which followed on the heels of Pope's work. Also see Arnold.

15 Pound, Ezra. A Draft of Thirty Cantos. New Directions, 1934.

16 See Lesson 36 in A Reading Course in Homeric Greek, by Schoder (Loyola, Chicago, 1986)

17 See Preminger.

18 See Three Centuries of New Haven: 1638-1938 by Rollin G. Osterweis (Yale, 1953) P.168.

19 Listed under "q" in most editions of Webster's

20 From p.139 "The Child of Civilization", an essay on Mandelstam's concerns with classical culture, in the larger collection of essays Less Than One by Joseph Brodsky (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1986)

21 See Watson, p48

22 These readings may be found in The Norton Reader, Sixth Edition, Shorter. Eastman, Arthur M. General Editor. Norton, New York, 1984.

23 Compare the first lines of Chapman's Odyssey with the sonnet by Keats, "Upon First Looking into Chapman's Homer."

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