A CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACH TO MYTHOLOGY
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The study of mythology affords the opportunity for the stimulation of critical thinking skills in the high school English classroom. Traditionally, we follow a Eurocentric approach to mythology and then use the journey motif found in the Greek epic *The Odyssey* as a lens for discussion because this motif encompasses the role of the supernatural in every day life, the decisions involved in any quest, the values of the culture as personified in the individual hero, and the hero, and the hero's attempt to answer the basic questions of life: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? Why is there evil?

Such a framework allows the students to engage in the critical thinking skills of comprehension (What was the hero's journey?), analysis (What was special about Odysseus' quest?), synthesis (What application can you make to your own life?), and evaluation (Do you think Odysseus' quest was worthwhile?)

But this framework is limited because the perspectives by which these heroes view their world are not shared by other cultures and by women. Selecting a Eurocentric and male perspective limits us because it restricts our ability to synthesize, the universe of exploration is so narrow it gives us limited information about ourselves.

Our quest as teachers is to find a way to extend the angles of vision by exploring such diverse cultural figures as Arjuna, Psyche, Gilgamesh, Isis, Innana, Spider Woman and to look at the new scholarship, particularly that of Gilligan, Asante, Belenky, and McIntosh, which provides inclusive approaches.

The following unit of study is an example of how a critical thinking skills focus can be enriched through the reading of diverse cultural texts:

**ONE: Formulating the Questions, Finding Diverse Responses**

In order to achieve the above objective, have the students:

1. draw from their personal experiences or knowledge by brainstorming and listing the 'big questions' they would like to have answered.
2. hypothesize! Do you think people all over the world answer these questions in the same manner...with the same explanations?
3. provide a loose framework for the information they will collect by addressing the following questions: How do you answer these questions? Why do you answer these questions one way while others in the class have different explanations or believe there are no answers available?
4. continue to formulate patterns by sharing one of the answers their ancestors gave for the big questions. Are there times when it would be impossible for a person to provide these answers? (N.B. It is important to be sensitive to our African-American brothers and sisters whose specific origin has been stolen from them.)
5. investigate through library research and then determine the similarities and differences among the mythologies of ancient civilizations, cultures, countries: Egyptian, Sumerian, Hindu, Greek, Quiche Mayan, Japanese, Chinese, Celtic, Kiowa, Hopi etc.

6. distinguish between one mythology and another by noting the fundamental differences.
7. extract the essential elements (the reasons for creation, the process of creation, the order, the material) and then write comparison/contrast essays using these elements as organizers.
8. evaluate the different cultural responses to the 'big questions.' Have any views been omitted? What values are being presented? Does goddess worship give us a different presentation about nature?
9. develop their own explanations for why exists in this world, the purpose for existence, etc.

**TWO: Individual Cultural Responses to the 'Big Questions'**

In this unit, the students explore the lives of cultural heroes and heroines who set out in search of answers to these 'Big Questions.' They examine the lives of cultural heroes and ask: What makes X a hero? What is the nature of X's journey?, and in what ways is X's exterior journey analogous to an interior journey? The students identify the journey motif found in each of the stories they read. Traditionally, the pattern for some cultural heroes has been: one of miraculous birth, a hiding of the child, the bestowal of gifts, a quest for life's answers, trials and feats involving great physical strength, a descent into the psyche and the emergence of an individual who masers his world. This motif is applied to Perseus, Theseus, Hercules and Odysseus.

Students categorize, compare and contrast the roles of women and men in the hero stories. They note the assigned roles of temptress and helper to the women who are 'included' in the text. They begin to identify polarized concepts of the purpose of life.

Have the students expand their notion of journey by looking at the neglected female motifs or patterns in the heroine's search for self and connectedness. They should examine the story of Psyche and try to determine what knowledge she discovers, what methods she uses to accomplish her task or journey, and whether or not these patterns differ in any way from her male counterparts (Edwards, *Psyche*).

Continue to explore this female pattern by reading about Innana (Ishar) careful to note the differences between her descent into the underworld and Psyche's descent. How are these two stories variations of an earlier story found in the Egyptian myth of Isis? Students are asked to generalize. Why do you think a similar story would develop quite differently in two separate cultures? What do these distinctions tell you about the cultures, their values, the government, and the roles
of women and men? Would a different mythology emerge out of a culture where the role of women was in decline? Speculate.

At this point, students are ready to read stories about individuals and their quests in search of the answers to the 'big questions.' Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club affords the opportunity for students to examine the quest of mothers and daughters in search of the answers to life...their need to be connected to each other (Belenky et al. Woman's Ways of Knowing) and to the earth. Students can explore Jing Mei-Woo's journey...to find her connection to her sisters and her China, that 'one fragile identification, a jade link handcuffed to (her) wrist.' Where she will 'remember her (your) mother who walked for centuries (Song, 'Lost Sister').

Students may continue to expand their cross-cultural understanding by reading the epics Gilgamesh and The Mahabarata along with the Egyptian Book of the Dead and The Bible. These texts afford excellent opportunities to examine the 'big questions' of: Why evil?, Should one go to war?, Is there immortality?, and What is the purpose of life?

So that the inclusive approach is more than just the content piece of the curriculum, allow the students to tell the stories of their lives, to share their personal journeys, goals, battles with Humbaba, questions about the war, need for connectedness...in short, their on-going quests and their need to find answers to the 'big questions.' This way the students will find the curriculum to be in the words of Emily Style, 'both a window and a mirror.'

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The National SEED Project (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) established teacher-led faculty development seminars throughout the nation and the world. It prepares school teachers to hold year-long reading groups with other teachers to discuss making school curricula gender-fair and multi-cultural.

SEED reading and discussion groups meet monthly during a school year for three hours at a time. They enroll 10-20 teachers from all subject areas and from one or more schools public and private. Each group is coordinated by one or two teachers who have attended a week-long leaders' workshop during the previous summer.

Key questions for all participants in SEED seminars are: How can curriculum and pedagogy be made both gender-fair and multicultural? And how can curriculum and teaching methods provide, in the metaphors of Emily Style, 'both windows into others' experience and mirrors of each student's own reality and validity?

The project began in 1987 and has established seminars led by 130 teachers in 30 states, Tokyo, Taipei, Jakarta, and Hong Kong. Over 2000 educators have participated in SEED seminars to date. Project Co-Directors are Peggy McIntosh, Associate Director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, and Emily Style, English Teacher and Diversity Coordinator, Madison, New Jersey, School District.

SUGGESTED READINGS (from page 15)


