

***Monkey King: Journey to the West* Lesson Plan 1**

Introducing the Epic Genre

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Overview:

This lesson is designed to introduce students to *Monkey King*, the novel's literary history, and epic as a genre. The lesson covers information from the first eight chapters of the novel. For this reason, this lesson is best suited for the first day of teaching *Monkey King*.

This lesson has been adapted from the "Introduction to Genre Fiction" exercise included in Diana Fuss and William A. Gleason's *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 exercises for the college classroom* (pages 199-201).

Objectives:

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Define the Epic genre and identify standard conventions of that genre.
- Identify how *Journey to the West* aligns with the Epic genre.

Class Structure:

15 minutes: Introduction to *Monkey King*

- Start the lesson by introducing students to the literary history of *Monkey King: Journey to the West*:
 - This version of the Monkey King story was compiled in the 16th century and was originally published in 1592 in Nanjing, east China (Lovell xvi). Although *Monkey King* is traditionally attributed to Wu Cheng'en, scholars cannot be completely sure who authored the novel because it was published anonymously. Lovell writes "the best we can say is that sometime in the sixteenth century, a talented writer with a passion for literary impishness and descriptive poetry knitted existing characters and stories together with episodes of his own creation into a single novel" (xix).
 - This book "reflects the dynamic literary milieu of sixteenth-century China. The Ming dynasty (1668-1644) had begun in high tyrannical style....Despite the terrors of the Ming political system, the actual limits to central control left room for an extraordinary cultural fluorescence... Ming China housed, at any one time, more books than the rest of the world put together" (xix).
 - "*Journey to the West* offers a tongue-in-cheek ethnography of sixteenth-century Chinese imaginations of the spirit realm. The immortals and monsters that fill the novel are reassuringly like us. Their bureaucracies and governments replicate those of the human world" (xxiv).
 - Although this version of the Monkey King story reflects sixteenth-century ideas of the spirit realm and politics, the story of Tripitaka's pilgrimage dates to the late 620s, when the real monk journeyed to India during the Tang dynasty (xvii). The addition of a troublesome Monkey disciple appears in the thirteenth-century (xvii).
 - Lovell's translation offers an abridged, 36-chapter version of the original 100-chapter novel.

15 minutes: Discussion of the Epic Genre

- Develop definition of Epic genre as a class:
 - Ask students to list any genre conventions of the Epic genre that come to mind. Keep a running list on a whiteboard or PowerPoint.
 - Use the following questions to guide students' brainstorming: "What elements does a story need to have to be [Epic]? What kinds of characters, relationships, or events would you expect to encounter? What kinds of beginnings or endings? What kind of setting or time period? Why?" (Fuss and Gleason 200). You might also ask students to list any examples of Epic books and movies.
 - Once you have a detailed list, open the floor to debate. Are there any listed genre conventions that students do not agree with? Are there any elements that should be cut from the list? Ask students to defend their answers as they offer their arguments.
 - Ask students to help you draft a brief definition of the Epic genre based on the list you have created together.

15 minutes: Lecture on the Epic

- Give students a formal definition of the epic:
 - "A long and formal narrative poem written in an elevated style that recounts the adventures of a hero of almost mythic proportions who often embodies the traits of a nation or people" (Murfin and Ray 124).
 - "Today, epic may also be used more generally to refer to any event involving heroic actions taken in boarding significant situations" (Murfin and Ray 124).
 - Common characteristic of an epic:
 - The protagonist is a hero of great stature and significance (whether historical or mythic).
 - The setting is on a grand and vast scale, often encompassing the known world at the time of composition.
 - The plot entails noble, fantastic, and even superhuman efforts.
 - Supernatural entities often involve themselves in the action and the affairs of the hero, who often must descend into the underworld before he can claim victory.
 - The writing exhibits an elevated style designed to complement and heighten the already mythic stature of the characters and their actions.
- Have students compare this definition of the epic to the definition the class developed together.
- Point out that this definition is based in the Western literary tradition and uses Greek epic poetry as its source. Chinese epics may not fit perfectly into the tradition, and, in fact, scholars have debated how well the term "epic" fits Chinese literature. Still, the idea of the "epic" shares enough similarities with the Chinese heroic poems to be useful. Marie Chen argues, "Chinese poems are certainly unlike the European heroic poems, yet they too deal with doughty deeds and stalwart warriors and therefore should be considered within the heroic tradition" (143).
- Ask students to list some ways that *Monkey King* fits the definition of an epic and some ways that the definition or characteristics don't quite fit the novel.

15 minutes: Small-group Discussion

- Break students into small groups of 3-4 people and assign one of the previously-discussed genre conventions to each group.
- Have each group complete the following tasks:
 - Identify 1-2 passages in the first 8 chapters in which the assigned convention appears in the novel.
 - As a group, use your selected passages to address the following questions:
 - How does the genre convention appear in the text?
 - In what ways does the text align with the convention?
 - In what ways does the text differ from the convention? What effect do those differences have?

15 minutes: Class Discussion

- Have students present their group findings. Record the specific ways that the novel expresses Epic genre conventions alongside the previously generated list of genre conventions so that students can see the overlap. Start another list of the ways *Journey to the West* deviates from those conventions so that students can see the distinctions.
- Using the lists generated as a guide, perform close readings on a few passages with the class.
 - The primary questions to be addressed through the discussion include:
 - How is Monkey introduced to us? Is he a heroic figure? Why or why not?
 - How does the novel represent the world and the spirit world? What do those representations tell us about the time in which *Journey to the West* was composed?
 - How would you describe the tone or style of the passage?
 - Sample Passages:
 - Pages 67-68: “‘This monkey,’ Laozi explained, ‘ate the peaches and drank the wine of immortality, and swallowed five calabashes of elixir. I expect that the contents of his stomach have been smelted into a magical mass that, united with his constitution, has made him almost indestructible. Let me slow-cook him in the Brazier of Eight Trigrams to extract the elixir; once that’s done, he’ll crumble to ashes.’ The Jade Emperor told his security forces to hand Monkey over to Laozi, who took him directly to Tushita Palace... [49 days later] The slow-cooking, it seems, had only further refined Monkey’s powers. With discipline, he might become a force for supernatural good; without it, he was pure animal—a wrecking ball in heaven.”
 - Page 69:

“‘When were you born? When did you learn the Way? Why are you making such a nuisance of yourself?’

“For reasons best known to himself, Monkey chose to answer in free verse:

“Born of heaven and earth, infused with immortal magic,
I am a monkey from Flower-Fruit Mountain.
After making my home in Water-Curtain Cave,
I sought instruction in the mysteries of eternal life
And mastered the art of infinite transformations.

Since earth was too small for me,
I set my heart on the Jade Heaven.
No one can reign forever in the Hall of Divine Mists,
Just as king succeeds king in the human world.
True heroes dare to fight and win.
Strength is honor, and none are stronger than I. Yield to Monkey!”

Sources:

Chan, Marie. “Chinese Heroic Poems and European Epic.” *Comparative Literature*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1974, pp. 142–68. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1769867>. Accessed 19 Apr. 2023.

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Murfin, Ross, and Supryia M. Ray. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. 4th ed. Macmillan, 2018.