***The Odyssey* Lesson Plan 1**
Introducing the Epic
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Overview:
This lesson is designed to introduce students to *The Odyssey,* the story's literary history, and the epic as a genre. The lesson covers information from the first nine books of *The Odyssey*. For this reason, this lesson is best suited for the first day of teaching *The Odyssey*.

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* (Fuss and Gleason 199-201).

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

1. Define the Epic genre and identify standard conventions of that genre
2. Identify how *The Odyssey* aligns with the Epic genre
3. Explain the literary history of *The Odyssey*

Class Structure:
15 minutes: Introduction to Homer's *The Odyssey*

- Start the lesson by introducing students to the literary history of *The Odyssey*
    - *The Odyssey* is an ancient epic poem that tells the story of Odysseus's ten-year journey home from the Trojan War, as well as his wife, Penelope's, attempts to fend off the suitors who want to marry her and take ownership of Ithaca and his son, Telemachus, attempts to learn more about what happened to his father.
    - The poem is over 20,000 lines long and is written in a fairly exacting meter—dactylic hexameter.
    - **Authorship**: The origins of *The Odyssey* are unknown and highly debated. Both *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, another epic poem attributed to Homer that tells the story of the Trojan War, show signs that they evolved from oral poems. In particular, both make use of repetitive constructions and phrases (epithets) that are common in orature. Still, scholars have discovered almost nothing about Homer himself, and theories range from imagining him as a blind, illiterate bard, like Demodocus, to a genius writer who compiled centuries of oral tradition, to viewing 'Homer' as a name attributed to a group of writers who compiled *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad.*
    - **Date of Origin**: The date of origin is also a matter of some debate. As Wilson explains, "In the middle of the eighth century BCE, the inhabitants of Greece began to adopt a modified version of the Phoenician alphabet to write down their language. The Homeric poems may have been one of the earliest products of this

new literacy. If so, they would have been composed some time in the late eighth century. But some scholars have suggested a significantly later date, in the early, middle, or late seventh century BCE; others, less plausibly, have suggested even later dates of composition. The near consensus is that, at some point between the late eighth and late seventh century, a hundred-year-long window, *The Odyssey* was composed." (Wilson 13)

        - By at least the sixth century BCE, the homeric poems achieved a "central place in the cultural and educational life of ancient Greece and Rome" (16).
    - **Location**: While some of the locations in *The Odyssey* refer to real places that still exist, like Sparta and Athens, many of the locations in *The Odyssey* are clearly fictional/mythical. For example, the city of the Laestrygonians (cannibalistic giants) has no clear referent. But, as Wilson points out, "readers since antiquity have tried to locate the wanderings of Odysseus in the real Mediterranean and Aegean world. By the third century BCE, certain traditional identifications of Homeric geography with real geography had developed. Scylla and Charybdis were identified with the Straits of Messina (where there are often rough currents, though never six-headed sea-monsters). Sicily was identified as the Island of the Cyclops—a rich, fertile land inhabited by non-Greek people, whose customs and agricultural practices are different from those of Greece." (Wilson 17).
        - "'Greece,' as a unified entity, is an invention of the classical age; in the sixth and especially the fifth centuries BCE, Greek-speaking people began to define themselves as Hellenes, in contrast to the 'barbarian' (meaning 'non-Greek speaking') peoples of other civilizations, such as the Persians and the Egyptians. But in Homer, as Thucydides points out, there is no single term for all Greek people." (17).
- Provide students with some vocabulary for reading *The Odyssey*
    - Homeric poems begin with an **invocation**, a prayer or address the nine muses for the inspiration, skill, knowledge, or the right emotion to finish a poem worthy of this subject matter
    - ***In medias res*** means "in the middle of things." *The Odyssey* begins several years into Odysseus's journey home, rather than at the start of his journey.
    - *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* both use **epithets**, which describe characters and objects with an "essential quality or characteristic, rather than a trait that the object or person possesses only in a particular moment" (Wilson 6). For example, Telemachus is always described as "thoughtful Telemachus" and the sea is always described as "wine-dark" even when those descriptions might not seem accurate at the moment.

- ***Xenia*** means "guest-friendship," an important networking and social relationship wherein elite men were welcomed into each others' homes, creating a bond that would extend to future generations.

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 in this genre? 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 that come to mind.
  - 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
  - The term "epic" is related to the Greek words *epos*, which means "word," "story" or "song," and *epe*, which means "tell." As Wilson explains, "An epic poem is, at its root, simply a tale that is told (Wilson 1).
  - Over time, the term "epic" has come to denote an entire genre of literature that has certain similarities and characteristics across texts.
    - "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, and so should be aligned quite closely with this reading. Epics from other time periods or places may not fit the same definition.
- Ask students to list some ways that *The Odyssey* fits the definition of an epic and ask if they see any ways that the definition or characteristics don't quite fit the narrative.

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 9 books 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 poem 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 *The Odyssey* deviates from those conventions so that students can see the distinctions.
- Using the lists you have generated together 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 Odysseus introduced to us? Is he a heroic figure? Why or why not?
        - How are other characters introduced? What do we know about them so far?
        - How does the poem represent the connection between humans and supernatural beings? What do those representations tell us about the world of *The Odyssey*?
        - How would you describe the tone or style of the passage?

- **Pages 185-186**

Acknowledging the edict sent from Zeus,
the goddess went to find Odysseus.
She found him on the shore. His eyes were always
tearful; he wept sweet life away, in longing
to go back home, since she no longer pleased him.
He had no choice. He spent his night with her
inside her hollow cave, not wanting her
though she still wanted him. By day he sat
out on the rocky beach, in tears and grief,
staring in heartbreak at the fruitless sea.

The goddess stood by him and said, "Poor man!
Stop grieving, please. You need not waste your life.
I am quite ready now to send you off.
Using your sword of bronze, cut trunks and build
a raft, fix decks across, and let it take you
across the misty sea. I will provide
water, red wine, and food, to stop you starving,
and I will give you clothes, and send a wind
to blow you safely home, if this is what
those sky gods want. They are more powerful
than me; they get their way."

Odysseus,
Informed by many years of pain and loss,
shuddered and let his words fly at her.
"Goddess, you have some other scheme in mind,
not my safe passage. You are telling me
to cross this vast and terrifying gulf,
in just a raft, when schooners
sped on winds from Zeus would not succeed.
No, goddess, I will not get on a raft,
unless you swear to me a mighty oath
you are not planning yet more pain for me."

At that, divine Calypso smiled at him.
She reached out and caressed him with her hand,
saying, "You scalawag! What you have said
shows that you understand how these things work.
But by this earth, and by the sky above,
And by the waters of the Styx below,
which is the strongest oath for the blessed gods,
I swear I will not plot more pain for you.
I have made plans for you as I would do

for my own self, if I were in your place.
I am not made of iron; no, my heart
is kind and decent, and I pity you."

- **Pages 240-241**

Wily Odysseus, the lord of lies,
answered,

"My lord Alcinous, great king,
it is a splendid thing to hear a poet
as talented as this. His voice is godlike.
I think that there can be no greater pleasure
than when the whole community enjoys
a banquet, as we sit inside the house,
and listen to the singer, and the tables
are heaped with bread and meat; the wine boy ladles
drink from the bowl and pours it into cups.
To me this seems ideal, a thing of beauty.
Now something prompted you to ask about
my own sad story. I will tell you, though
the memory increases my despair.
Where shall I start? Where can I end? The gods
have given me much to cry about.
First I will tell my name, so we will be
acquainted and if I survive, you can
be my guest in my distant home one day.
I am Odysseus, Laertes' son.,
known for my many clever tricks and lies.
My fame extends to heaven, but I live
in Ithaca, where shaking forests hides
Mount Neriton.

Sources:

Fuss, Diana, and William A. Gleason, editors. *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom*. Princeton UP, 2016.

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

Wilson, Emily. Introduction. *The Odyssey*, by Homer, translated by Wilson. Norton, 2018, pp. 1-79.

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