

**Adventure, Reflection, and Transformation**

- 1. Mythic story in a high school curriculum*
- 2. Odyssey project, a multi-media exploration*

**Presentation to the  
Association of Literary Scholars and Critics (ALSC)  
November 4, 2005  
Cambridge, MA**

**Elizabeth Craig-Olins**

## **Adventure, Reflection, and Transformation**

1. *Mythic story in a high school curriculum*
2. *Odyssey project, a multi-media exploration*

### **Myth in the ninth grade curriculum**

[**title slide 1**] *Good Morning, and thank you for coming to this session.*

Why do we tell stories [**click**], and when do stories become literature?

[**click**] These questions lay the foundation for our year's coursework, linking ancient and modern texts. The ongoing challenge is how to connect stories and the "big ideas" in a way that engages a wide range of 9th grade students in public school.

This morning, with your indulgence, I will briefly explain the curriculum decisions made within our English department concerning the teaching of myth, and proceed to describe the multi-media project on the *Odyssey* I have developed over the past several years. I will conclude with examples of student work that demonstrate various levels of engagement with that text.

### **Curriculum decisions: the challenge of what to cover**

[**click**] Several years ago, the mythology we taught was limited to Greek and Roman. With newer teachers and a growing focus on multicultural texts, we experimented with a variety of myths (Chinese, Hindu, North and South American, Norse, Irish) culminating in a festival day for all the 9<sup>th</sup> grade classes to share their products (by way of dance, dramatic readings, exhibits, multi-media). The festival day and mandate to teach multicultural myths was short lived, however, for reasons mainly to do with time. [**Teachers were encouraged to continue to teach them, but**] the *Old Testament* had become a core text, and then three years ago we decided to make the *Odyssey* a core. While its merits need no justification, the tradeoffs were in some ways a bit uneasy. Yet I am

reminded of Mary Oliver's point regarding the inability of students to recognize allusions in poetry:

Such lack of recognition is a problem that becomes ever more **[click]** serious as the fields of classical mythology, history and religion are less generally studied; for these are the fields mined heavily for allusions in the age of metrical poetry.... There is no solution but the pursuit of the particular knowledge that will disclose the meaning of the allusion. (*Rules of the Dance*, 74) **click**

Allusion is, of course, a strong rationale for teaching the *Bible* and the *Odyssey*. Another is the power of story. We will continue to argue over what to cover. For my part, omitting stories so fertile in allusion as Theseus, Prometheus, Perseus, and Pandora is regrettable and I sometimes wonder if an in-depth treatment of myths—classical and other— would not work better for freshmen than the *Odyssey*. Students vary so much at this age in the development of their abilities to grasp abstract concepts. The language and the structure can be confusing, the length daunting, the abstractions and digressions difficult. On the other hand, maybe the *Odyssey* is just the right story because it can be understood at varying levels. And maybe there is a reason I never tire of teaching it. There will always be students who enjoy taking on the epic text and grappling with its literary complexity, as there will always be students who are neither inclined nor interested in doing interpretive work with texts.

As for my own curriculum, **[click]** I like to begin the year with stories from the oral tradition **[click]** and then move gradually into the literary craft **[click]** of storytelling with the core texts. For the first assignment students

choose a culture, research its creation story, and retell it to the class. Emphasis is on the characteristics of oral story telling and the notion that stories passed on through voice and [click] memory are alive and subject to variation.

Comparing creation stories brings out important commonalities (chaos, watery beginnings, battles of good and evil, people who succumb to corruption, etc.) and also introduces the big questions about who we are and what it means to be human that thread through the rest of the year. With the *Bible*, [click] we add complexity to the study of story, introducing such motifs as [click] testing by a deity, [click] the trickster [click], and the power of seduction [click]. By the time we get to the *Odyssey*, we can transfer those ideas from the Biblical characters [click] (Abraham and Isaac, [click] Jacob and Esau, and [click] Samson and Delilah) to Odysseus [click] as he is [click] tested by Poseidon, as he dissembles and disguises himself, and as he encounters [click] the seductive temptations of Circe, [click] the Sirens, and [click] Calypso. And with this text we look further into story [click] by examining craft through close reading, and such poetic devices as epic simile, meter, repetition, imagery, characterization, and digression.

### **Teaching the *Odyssey***

*Every time I teach the *Odyssey* I rediscover why I love this text. It is a great story, and it is a story about the art of storytelling. It is about what it means to be human. It is about coming home, physically and spiritually, and about transformation, literally and figuratively. It is the archetypal heroic quest— a journey story that helps us to understand ourselves as we read it and as we read modern stories that still follow its pattern....* I say something along

these lines to my students before we plunge into the reading, and hope that these promises will be in some way fulfilled for them by the end of the unit.

### *Engaging a wide range of students*

It may have been the challenge of engaging a wide range of students that inspired me to create a multi-media project with elastic parameters, and why the *Odyssey* project I am about to describe is one part of my curriculum that I have not substantially changed over seven years. The richness of the *Odyssey*, as well as its influence on artists through history, has enabled me to craft a unit that serves a multitude of pedagogic purposes. In an effort to enrich my students' reading of the *Odyssey* I offer an extensive project [\[click\]](#) that involves researching a character, locating a variety of artworks, and creating a power point presentation requiring technological skills, visual design, and art and text interpretation that employs voice and music.

### *A word on translations*

*Before I continue with the project description, let me say a word on translations:* In my ongoing search for a text that would engage as many students as possible, I have experimented with prose (Rouse, Christ) and poetic (Fitzgerald, Lombardo) translations of the *Odyssey*. Because my struggling students in standard level classes had a very difficult time even with excerpts from the Fitzgerald translation, I resorted to a simple version by Christ the following year. The students had no problem reading it, but they were neither inspired nor challenged. The Rouse version tells a better, more complex story than the Christ, but I knew by this time that I wanted to work with a poetic translation. I found the Lombardo translation to be just challenge enough for standard students. It's accessibility gives less engaged readers the opportunity to read a classic epic in a sophisticated style without getting completely lost or

turned off. [Though even with its extended similes highlighted in italics, many students really struggle to understand the comparisons]. Still, Lombardo did not provide enough interpretive challenge for my more advanced students, so I will return this year to the Fitzgerald, where I began, because I find the language richer and the imagery stronger, and because it offers a fine introduction to interpretive reading for young high school students who are willing to grapple with the text. As well, the reading challenge and poetic elements offer discussion points on the focus question about when story becomes literature.

### **Multi-media project: the *Odyssey* in Power Point**

**[click]** Perhaps because we live in a visual age, many students have trouble imagining the characters and situations described in the poem's verses. While it can be argued that this is precisely why we should focus our efforts on text rendering, the thousands of images inspired by this text that exist all over the world are too wonderful to ignore. They bring the stories to life, and with them my students bring their study of the *Odyssey* to life. The hands-on audio/visual projects that they create serve to deepen their understanding. The project also raises their awareness of the deep fascination humans have held for mythology through the ages, in part because of the essential truths about humankind they reveal.

And so to the project, starting with some pre-reading exercises.

#### **1. Pre-*Odyssey* exercises**

Prior to reading the *Odyssey* students team up to present background information on the Trojan War. Then they read the story of "The House of

Atreus, and I follow up by retelling the story. (This serves the dual purpose of continuing the oral story-telling tradition as well as clarifying an extremely complicated tale.) I confess I also retell the story because I love to. Students at this age are old enough to handle the shocking events and still young enough to *be* shocked. If there are any sleepers in the class, they always wake up when Pelops is served up on a platter to the gods by his father. The characters in this darkly cursed family are alluded to so often in the *Odyssey* that it is worth the time spent on it, and once we start reading the *Odyssey* students will see how Homer works with allusion in the narrative. Additionally, the suffering of Orestes at the hands of the Erinyes, and his redemption through the mercy of the Eumenides at the close of the saga, introduce the concept of transformation which we will encounter literally with Proteus in the *Odyssey*, and later, literally and figuratively with Odysseus. Though these are complicated ideas that may run over the heads of some students, the story holds its own even if students do not follow this line of thought in all regards. We also discuss such relevant terms as nostos (**homecoming**) and aidos (**a complicated relative of compassion**), and cover a bit of ground on Mnemosyne (**goddess of memory**), her daughters the Muses, Themis and Dike (**divine and worldly justice**), and Nemesis (**righteous anger**), as these personified concepts will come up in the reading.

\*\*\*

Just after the pre-*Odyssey* material and before students read the story, I introduce the text with a slide show summing up the events that precede, the story **such as the wedding of Achilles' parents, Peleus and Thetis; the sacrifice of Iphigenia; and the various murders in the household of Agamemnon**, and pointing out features and themes they will encounter in the reading.

In particular, we take a close look at a Rubens painting of the Judgment of Paris, [click] where I can model identifying symbol and gesture to understand what is going on in the painting. [I point out Paris offering the apple to Aphrodite, somewhat tentatively, while infuriating Athena, identified by her aegis and her owl, and Hera, with her attendant peacock, who spits at Parris's impassive dog. Hermes is of course known by his winged helmet and wand. Meanwhile we see that frightening image of the Fury Alecto in the sky, threatening war).

Students will have to do the same in their own slide shows.

## 2. Reading the text and preparing for the slide show

Once launched into the text, the readings and class sessions are carried out conventionally. By the time we get to Book 12, I assign the Power Point project and the paper that precedes it. [click] Students choose a character [from the story] to research and then write a paper that includes a biographical sketch (in, as well as outside of the *Odyssey*), a passage from the *Odyssey* featuring the chosen character, and an explanation of that passage establishing its context and the relationship of the character to Odysseus.

### *Research*

Research must include books and electronic [click] sources for both the written and visual contents of the project. Not surprisingly, the best resources for solid (in depth) information on the gods and heroes can be found in the older books in the library. (*I have recently been surprised to see how lost kids can be in front of a shelf full of books: Apparently they are so used to internet searches that browsing the books without a key word search has become daunting.*) But for an extensive variety of good color representations of gods and heroes the

Internet is most obliging. Students download images or scan them from high quality art books and save them for use in the slide show.

### *Visual Literacy 1: art*

This is where the project comes alive visually, and where students can apply their newfound expertise to the interpretation of a painting. They have to know their characters well enough to recognize the traits and symbols of these subjects in works of art, and to at least guess at the story being depicted. I explain that this is a kind of **[click]** “visual literacy,” where I am asking them to interpret the artwork in much the same way I ask them to do close reading of poetry or narrative. They learn to look closely at gesture and expression. And by selecting a variety of works to illustrate their projects, they learn to see how different artists, at different periods of time, have interpreted the same mythological characters and events from different points of view.

In the abduction of Helen **[click]**, for instance, **[click]** a Greek vase shows her running away. **[click]** The painter Reni **[click]** portrays her ambiguously– perhaps victim, **[click]** perhaps not, **[click]** While a **David** painting **[click]** shows her as Paris’s willing paramour.

### **3. Creating the slide show**

While the written report serves as the basis for the text in the multimedia project, students learn to distill their information to make it suitable for a slide show. To make optimal use of the visual capability of this format, students must illustrate each slide with the images they have researched. Variety is important. They are encouraged to find art from periods that span ancient to modern. The objective for the slide show is for the student to create a project that others can learn from, much like an interactive museum display.

### *Visual Literacy 2: design*

**[click]** The second kind of visual literacy I explain to students is about the graphic display of information. Students are encouraged to think carefully about **how** they want to reach their audience. What is an appropriate amount of text for each slide? How can the relationship of visual elements and “background space” affect the viewer’s understanding? How does the organization of font sizes, color, and placement of elements bring the reader into the show? How can transition sounds and background music be used to evoke character, setting, or events?

### *Vocal Interpretation*

**[click]** Finally, there is a vocal component. Students select a short passage to read that highlights their character’s role in the *Odyssey*. Recording the reading should appropriately dramatize the situation and mood of the character they have now come to know so well. As they record their own voices reading their selected passages, students must consider how voice, tone, mood, and rhythm are appropriate to the passage, and reflect those elements in their vocal inflection.

### *Beyond text: the slide show reveals hidden talents and levels of engagement*

**[click]** One of the rewarding results of this project is discovering talents that wouldn’t surface in a text-only response. The multimedia approach always reveals expressive and interpretive talents of students who are not necessarily shining stars of written work. The project-based approach allows for a broader base of skills and talents and values visual and auditory creativity, as well as playful responses. It is hard for a student not to be engaged fully in the process. Some get very involved in the technical tricks of the program; others enjoy

closely examining art. Some get involved in finding the right music; others in aesthetic design considerations. There are always surprises, and sometimes I am bowled over by results.

*I thought I would show you a few slides from a selection of projects that demonstrate how a variety of students have engaged in the project.*

### *Slide shows*

1. Yao: design, dramatic impact, use of bullets (not too much text on page), organization (only fell short on voice) (and this student never handed in one analytical essay)
2. Liz & Mel: best musical accompaniment and successful teamwork
3. Stefan: first 2 for background and expressive reading
4. John Q: This show demonstrates a high level of engagement with all elements of the assignment (design, vocal interpretation, extensive captions and a playful finale). It has extensive interpretive caption, recorded, (note blood motif in Agamemnon) and connection to Adam and Eve. **Also for documentation**

### **Move to Hyperstudio projects**

On a different scale is a project from several years ago when we used Hyperstudio. I chose this because it has stayed in my memory for its playfulness and humor—as I recall he had everyone laughing....

5. **[click] Ben G's first 2** Unlike some of his peers who did a tremendous amount of art research and interpretation, this student chose to use his voice to create his own interpretation of Zeus, the drawing tools rather than look for more art, and a haiku for his characterization. I don't know if you'd call this level **disengagement...** 😊

I should say here that I have offered an alternative assignment to my standard level students, which focuses more on storytelling and less on analysis and interpretation. The assignment was to create, in effect, an electronic story-book.

6. Justin's mystical settings for storytelling.

7. Sarina's Scylla and Charybdis

[\[Click out of hyperstudio to background screen\]](#)

### **Reflection**

Ultimately, has this approach been more effective than the traditional class lecture/discussion mode that is solely text based? I don't have an answer, but In end-of-year evaluations, students often hail this multimedia project as a highlight of their work in the class. Students who are particularly comfortable presenting their work in multi-media format bask in their success, and can be inspiring to peers. The kids learn a lot from each other, and in the end, learn from each other's projects. The atmosphere in the lab is usually chaotic, but most often productive. By the time they've finished with the *Odyssey* unit, they have practiced close textual analysis, employed vocal expression, learned technological presentation techniques, found a variety of artistic interpretations of a single character or event, and learned from each other. Some, at least, have increased their interpretive skills (which are tested when we tackle such poems as Louise Glück's "Circe's Power" or "Odysseus' Secret"). Others are satisfied to have put Calypso's seduction to music. Most, I hope, have reflected on the epic and their own response to it.

### *Documentation*

Documentation is an important facet of the project and also sometimes a frustrating one, particularly citing works of art. If the art is found in books, the documentation is easily accessible, but on the Internet art sources are often at best elusive, if not missing altogether. Recent work with our librarians has helped to account for web sources, but finding the artist, dates and locations is still a problem. Interestingly, the process of creating a bibliography just got easier; instant bibliography is just a keystroke away using the library's Bibliography Maker.

- This technology is a new literacy
- What I learn from the kids (Stefan's water bkgnd...)
- Their own vernacular: I'm teaching in a language that is more theirs than mine

## **Project components**

*Each project consists of a slide show of 10-30 slides that tell the story of their character and his or her role in the Odyssey. All slides should be illustrated, and at least three of the visual images must be explained through extended captions with a voice-over recording. A 6-12 line passage should also be recorded. Background music and transition sounds should be applied judiciously. A final bibliography slide should document all texts used as well as all artwork.*

*Ancillary materials available:*

*List of project components*

*Instruction handouts*

*Peer evaluation sheet*

*Student comments on the project*

## **A Note on the Process**

Two class periods are dedicated to research in the library, and 6-8 classes are devoted to developing the projects in the computer lab. Some students do a significant amount of work outside of class. Students who are technologically sophisticated often help the less adept, and employ techniques that inspire classmates to try inventive animations or visual effects.

## **Technical difficulties**

There are always technical difficulties— outdated machines, compatibility problems with home and school computers, software variables, downloading images from the internet, scanning images from books, and so on. Scanned images and sound take up a lot of memory; crashes are not uncommon. Time

constraints and lab availability can be frustrating, especially for students who need more time to produce projects to their satisfaction.

Before we sort through the difficulties of compatible word-processing programs and suitable forms in which to save artwork, I still have to teach many kids how to use the program— and be sure the instruction sheets match the version of the program in the lab. Some students want to work at home because they usually have newer versions of the program; how, then, to make their class-time productive. The lab sessions are generally chaotic.

Somehow we adapt to the flaws and get over the frustrations, and sometimes we settle for less than we'd envisioned because of technical or time limitations. But there is always high energy and high excitement when the day of sharing projects arrives. In musical-chairs-like fashion, students move from computer to computer to learn from and critique their peers' work. My hope is that by using technology to explore one facet of the *Odyssey* in depth, students' understanding of the general text will be enriched, and their consciousness raised about artistic interpretations of classical stories. Emphasis on interpreting symbol and imagery in art has lent itself well to interpreting poetry, and teaching close reading of text in general