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The Popol Vuh: A High School Literature Unit

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Introduction and Rationale

When English teachers sit down to develop curricula in world literature, European writing and writers seem to take precedence. This is partly because the exposure for teachers-in-training at the undergraduate level is typically Euro-centric. Even if teachers specialize in American literature, the focus is on writers steeped in Western traditions. In high school anthologies, little attention is paid to the literature of native America, aside from a few nods to North American Indian mythologies, and in some enlightened collections, selections from Central and South American writers of the last century. (Of course much of the latter has been written in Spanish, so selections depend upon translations.) But the bigger issue is an assumption that the literature of any ancient American culture is, by the very nature of those defunct civilizations, irrelevant to the modern student of literature, and more a curiosity to the student of history or archaeology. The fact is that literature is a representation of, and simultaneously an influence on, all civilizations great or small. Further, I believe that high school students in the United States have a cultural heritage in literature that reaches way beyond the European-based canon, and which they deserve to be acquainted with.

With these notions in mind, and using a translation of the *Popol Vuh* as a literary keystone, I developed this literature unit for inclusion in a twelfth grade curriculum that immerses students in the culture of the Maya civilization of the first millennium, especially the Classic period—from about the fourth through the tenth centuries A.D. I want to draw students' attention to the literary themes and conventions reflective of a great American civilization with which they are not so familiar. Using the mythical tales in the *Popol Vuh*, I draw on students' power of inference to determine what kind of civilization might have created and sustained such a literature. As measures of success, in terms of assessment, students ask questions like: What politics, religious beliefs, art, agriculture, social customs, and geography is reflected in this literature? What motivated its creation? What purposes (cultural, religious, artistic) did it serve? To help students make strong inferences, and to even care to find answers to these kinds of questions, careful study of the specific elements of the writing takes place.

Conventions in literature emphasized in the unit are: theme, tone, character and the techniques of characterization, symbolism, point of view, irony, satire, plot elements, setting, and the conventions of story telling, and figurative language devices. When considering audience and purpose, students will consider—for the sake of context and contrast—the general similarities found in several creation stories, and in the Bible's

account of creation in Genesis.

The intended participants for this teaching unit are twelfth grade vocational high school students. Demographically, the school population is African American (65%), White (25%), Hispanic (9%), and a few Asian students. While the primary interest in my school setting is preparation for a career in various technical, service, and trade occupations, students are offered the standard curriculum of a comprehensive high school, and are required four years of English, Social Studies, and Mathematics and three years of Science. Spanish is the only second language offered, and there are no arts electives. In fact, one motivation for developing this unit was the possibility of incorporating some elements of visual and performing arts into instruction.

A prime personal motivation for this unit reflects my belief that at the senior year, (especially among students who will choose career paths that will involve little or no further training or formal education), it is critical to expand a student's awareness of the variety of traditions in cultures other than his own. Most adults understand that such awareness yields a perspective that is critical to personal success and well-being, however a person defines them. And particularly in a world whose economic and political landscape is shifting and changing at nanoseconds, students facing futures in technical, trade, and service careers must not only see new horizons for reasons of personal enrichment, but will need perspective to function in that new world. Just think of the implications of what outsourcing means for a young American, for example.

Objectives

This unit is designed to meet established English Language Arts standards in the State of Delaware for eleventh and twelfth grade students. The first standard calls for the construction, examination and the extension of the meaning of literary texts. Any study of a culture's written mythology is appropriate content selection to meet this standard in a world literature sequence; and in fact, my choice of a mythology was consciously made for its elaborative power in "extending the meaning of text" to other cultural matters.

The second state standard expects students to make connections between themselves and society and culture. This standard, applied through the reading and teaching of a mythology from "across the border," forces those connections to take on a more universally human character, which is articulated in the school district standards.

The "nuts and bolts" objectives, in learners' terms, for literary study in this unit come down to the identification of specific considerations of: irony, parody and satire. Among figures of language students must identify and use in interpretation are: metaphor, simile, personification, symbolism and hyperbole. Consideration of the tale's tone and themes constitutes an important subject of student understanding, especially given the drama and humor contained in the *Popol Vuh*, and the variety of themes developed in them. Considering the widely-accepted recognition of plot elements, à la Aristotle—namely exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution, I want students to attempt to reconcile the structure of the *Popol Vuh* for themselves, since the tales are so unusual in this regard, and since it defies that kind of neat description.

Strategies

Myths

This unit is implemented in 8 to 10 ninety-minute instructional periods in a block schedule, over a two-week period. (Teachers in schools running traditional schedules would plan the unit to be implemented daily over a 3 week period.) The first 4 days in week 1 are consecutive at the beginning of the week, and the last 4 to 6 days occur at the end of the second week and into week 3. The reason for this time allotment is to separate the text-reading portions, direct instruction, goal articulation, and the activities associated with literary study, from the culminating projects and products, giving students processing time, and time for completion of projects and research.

The unit begins with an activity designed to set the stage for and to elicit from students conceptual understandings of mythology. In a cooperative group arrangement mythic stories are provided to individual members of each team, including the first lines of Genesis, a Japanese creation myth, an Australian aboriginal account, and a Hungarian creation story. (Any Internet search using the phrase "creation myths" will yield an abundance of choices appropriate for this activity.) Each of these texts has similarities and differences, of course. Toward an understanding of myth as a way of both painting existing culture and defining culture, students look for the commonalities, but also for iconic differences. For example, the Hungarian creator has a son who asks his father when he plans to create humans. The "heavenly father" reflects and answers his son that he plans to make a place for the humans that they can call their own, and basically says that he will create them for his little son (the sun god) to lord over ("Creation Myths"). The Japanese story tells of a "germ of life" that contained all elements. Of its own accord the germ mixes things around until a sea, a plant, one god, then more gods appear. One of these gods creates Japan by thrusting his rod into the sea and pulling up clumps of mud. Two gods come to Japan, make vegetation, get married and give birth to two daughters, whom they make the sun and moon, and a bad boy, who creates storms in the sea. Ultimately, a grandchild of the original gods on earth bears a son who is the first emperor of Japan ("Japanese Creation Myth").

Students retell the myths they have read as individuals to their groups, and as a group generate a list of similarities and differences among the tales on chart paper. I prompt them to look for comparisons in the personalities, differences in the fauna and flora, such as they are, objects and forces (supernatural and natural). Once this is accomplished, the first important question is asked: What do these tales tell you about the people who share and hold on to them? Specifically, what do they seem to believe about how they came to be? What qualities or way of life do you think they probably have as a result of their beginnings? What seems to be important to them? Why did the force or creator make them in the first place and what does it seem their purpose on earth is? If people want to be like their creators, what do students think will make them good or bad people?

This activity in some ways is the one requiring the most deftness and care, because no teacher wants to hazard theological debates in a public school; but it seems to me important that students see mythology as a repository for those things people consider central in their culture, and also as a template for the morality and cosmology of a culture. The word to prompt students to use in characterizing these tales is *tradition*, so that in discussions of the theme, equal respect for those who hold Genesis as the word of God, and those who do not is maintained.

For some ideas about how others have addressed the issue, I read a journal article which described an

attempt to compare the cosmogonies of the *Popol Vuh* and Genesis, the first book of the Bible. In an interdisciplinary course at Baylor University, a school strongly attached to Baptist Christian theology, a theologian and a sociology professor, Parsons and Cook (2004), team taught a course that compared the *Popol Vuh* and Genesis on literary and sociological bases. The article was very useful in helping me to determine how to steer around potentially explosive connections, and to approach the reading of Genesis as a cosmogony—a story of cultural origin that the authors say, "functions like a charter document for proper social and moral conduct" (p. 188).

The Myth Front and Center: Popol Vuh

Once students have a framework in which to understand the values attached to a myth, *Popol Vuh* can be rolled out. Three of the five parts of the myth, I believe, contain material that lends itself well to teaching, with respect to students' interest level. These parts consist of stories and adventures that can engage the reader, while the omitted part is a genealogy of the Quiche lords. In the three selected parts, there is comedy, violence, sports, deceit, family disputes, mutilation. . .all high-interest motifs for many students! Additionally, there is the triumph of youth and cleverness over age and stodgy authority—always good reading for teenagers. But key in articulating the theme is being able to generalize how a story reflects what we like to think of as transcendent truth, or what *connects* humanity universally. Theme arises in the texture of any story, and it is created through: characterization, point of view (or narrative perspective), metaphor, tone, plot structure, and through an understanding of the narrator's audience and purpose. So exploring these elements in a story equips a student to make reasonable statements of theme. Additionally, in the handling of this story, my intention is to provoke researchable inferences from students about the culture and beliefs of the Quiche Maya, whose mythology this is.

The Text of the Popol Vuh

The Quiche Maya were the ancient native people of the Yucatan peninsula, which today includes the Guatemalan highlands, parts of Honduras, eastern Mexico, and Belize. According to Goetz and Morley (1950), after the Spanish conquest of Mexico under Hernan Cortes in the sixteenth century, Pedro Alvarado, a captain under Cortes, was sent to subdue eastern regions known to be rich in natural resources. The Quiche rulers offered fierce resistance, but the Quiche finally capitulated. Some priests and nobility probably fled to another city, which today is called Santo Tomas Chichicastenango. The Spanish entrusted this city to Roman Catholic missionaries, and over several centuries of Spanish rule, the city became a cultural hub for the Quiche Indians. A priest named Francisco Ximenez, an accomplished linguist, earned the confidence of Indians who shared with him a sixteenth century manuscript written by natives, which Ximenez translated into Spanish, in the early eighteenth century. The *Popol Vuh* is available to us today because of this translation, but the whereabouts of the sixteenth century manuscript and its author are unknown.

Tedlock (1996) reveals that the text in ancient Maya would have been produced in a combination of logographic signs, (images that stand for entire words, sometimes with pictures), and phonetic signs, indicating a single sound. The whereabouts of this text is not only unknown, but was a sacred icon even for the Maya, and was probably hidden or destroyed in the Spanish conquest. The ancients believed that this book was not only an account of their origin and genealogy, but was itself an oracle whose words contained predictive magic.

The Myth(s)

As I pointed out, three of the five parts of the *Popol Vuh* are rich for student analyses, on account of their good

story lines. Students again team up for the reading of these selections in expert groups, whose job it is to read and take responsibility for one of the four books. This is an opportunity for a teacher to group students according to their ability and motivation to read drafts of text of varying lengths. For example, the first two parts run about 11 pages each, and the third part runs about 50 pages. My suggestion is to make two or three groups who will be assigned equal reading portions of part three, so that students in those groups individually have 25 at most, and as few as 17 pages to read. Teachers generally know how to compose groups of students who will not be daunted by "too much" reading.

Intentionally, students are not told whose mythology this is, but *are* told first, that it is a myth; and second, are instructed to take structured notes like those generated in the opening exercise with the abbreviated myths and the selection from Genesis. The idea here is to anticipate a culminating activity that produces good inferences and motivates some research, which is a curriculum requirement in most twelfth grade settings; but more on that later. I provide here summaries from each of the four parts to reveal the richness of the stories themselves.

In the first part of the *Popol Vuh*, as in so many creation stories, nothing exists. Suddenly, though, there are several gods, who create the earth and populate it with a multitude of creatures (indigenous to Mesoamerica, of course), like the jaguar. This is done while a central entity named Sovereign Plumed Serpent (Great Spirit?) acts as a kind of overseer. But when they realize that people might love them for all their chatter, they determine that they will remain animals. This is the first thread of one strong recurrent theme in the story, namely that the gods want to create beings who will "know their places," and will worship them. Next, the gods make men out of mud. But the new creatures cannot do anything, nor do they hold up very well in the rain! They are consigned to the trash heap too. The next attempt is to create men out of wood, with the help of Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, gods called the grandmother and grandfather. The wood people were stupid—prolific, but stupid; and again have neither consciousness of nor respect for their creators. They are like mock-ups of the men yet to be made, but useless. The gods destroy them in a flood. This event provides the first carnage in *Popol Vuh*. Not only does a resin rain pour down on these creatures, but also everything in the world turns on them—from cooking utensils to pet dogs. Deities lead the massacre, with names like Sudden Bloodletter and Crunching Jaguar. The result is splintering and pulverization for the men and women made of wood. Ending the first part of the story is the appearance of a being called Seven Macaw. There is no introduction of him, nor an explanation for his appearance; but it is clear that he is a vain, boastful creature who presents an immediate and striking contrast to the powerful beings who have attempted to create a humble, prayerful human race.

The Hero Twins appear for the first time in the tale. Their names are Hunahpuh and Xbalanque. Arguably, these are the main characters of *Popol Vuh*, though the sudden appearances, resurrections, and reincarnations of characters in this story constitute one of the subjects for students to investigate. Not to digress too much, but our Western tradition in literature has accustomed us to a more or less linear plot line, and the accommodations the reader must make to read this tale are among its peculiarities, and something students must resolve, when they analyze plot structure later in the unit. So, the twins decide that Seven Macaw is a threat to order, on account of his vanity and boastfulness. They decide to kill him. They hit him in the jaw with a dart as he climbs a tree, but when he falls from the tree he fights with the boys, ripping Hunahpuh's arm off, and running home to mount the arm as a trophy, and to nurse his sore jaw. (If students have read Beowulf, as many in twelfth grade have, the arm story is an interesting twist to the Anglo-Saxon hero's ripping the monster Grendel's arm off as a trophy.) Invoking their grandparents for help—Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, from the first part of the tale—the twins pose as dentists of sorts, and fool Seven Macaw into having all his teeth pulled, as well as his eyes gouged out. His teeth and eyes had been the source of his

boastfulness, inasmuch as their glitter and brightness allowed him to compare himself to the sun. Having lost his luster, Seven Macaw is *defeated*, and he dies.

The concept of defeat is a major literary theme in the *Popol Vuh*; and some students may derive the "morals" of the stories from this recurrent idea. The twins, whose genesis is detailed in the next part, are divine entities, and their behavior throughout the tale blueprints a kind of moral code. In this story, for example, the students might see that false pride is conduct not only distasteful to the Maya, but in their mythology at least, worthy of death. Also, violence in retribution is so frequent in the tale, that teens will surely be attracted to the *Scary Movie* motif.

To conclude this part of the book, the twins continue their vengeance by destroying the sons of Seven Macaw, Zipacna and Earthquake, two more characters whose behavior is unacceptable. In the first case, Zipacna carries a log for 400 boys who want to build a house. The boys conclude that anyone capable of carrying such a weight by himself is not to be trusted, so they trick Zipacna into going into a hole they have him dig for them, and they drop a log onto him. He survives by digging a side tunnel and collapsing the house of the 400 boys, killing them. One mythical element here lies in the fact that the 400 boys become stars in the sky. But the Hero Twins are outraged at Zipacna's behavior, and they ask him to reach a crab for them to eat in a cave under a mountain. Once there, the twins cause the mountain to slide down on Zipacna, killing him and turning him into stone. The mythical element here is that Zipacna is known to the Maya as the deity who creates mountains. This part of *Popol Vuh* ends with the vanquishing of Earthquake, the other son of Seven Macaw. The whole family's having been *defeated* for their improper behavior supports the status of the twins as heroes. The idea of heroics is another theme developed in the story, and one which can be readily explored by students, namely asking what the characteristics of a hero might be, how we traditionally see heroes, and asking whether or not these two fit the category in our terms.

The third part of the *Popol Vuh* is by far the most extensive and complex of the 5 parts, but also the most engaging for kids. There is plenty of action—bloodletting, comedy, and competition. However, I think students whose team handles this part should be the type of student whose ability and motivation to stay with a longer, more complex text is already apparent. The additional challenge of this reading is more related to its length than to its complexity, but there are plenty of students who are daunted easily by the challenge of a long assignment. In this part, there are many adventurous episodes involving the twins. The narrative structure is maybe best compared to the structure of a book like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in that it has many of the qualities of a picaresque novel, both for the fact that it reads episodically, and that it involves heroes who are satiric, and who foil the plans of those in established positions of authority. The heroes, of course, are the twins, Hunahpuh and Xbalanque, and the authority figures are the Lords of Xibalba, or the underworld—a set of particularly hateful and disgusting deities.

Before these stories get underway however, the reader is once again jolted out of the accustomed linear plot progression, and given the genealogy of the twins. In a nutshell, we are reintroduced to the grandmother and grandfather, Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, and their sons, One and Seven Hunahpu, who debuted in the first part of the story. One and Seven Hunahpu are ball-players. (The Ancient Maya played competitively with a real rubber ball on a court, pictures of which will be provided to students at an appropriate time.) Their ball playing disturbs the Lords of Xibalba, who send a messenger to the upper world with an invitation for the boys to come for a pickup game, which they accept. What the evil lords want are the uniforms and gear of the brothers. Lacking cleverness, One and Seven Hunahpu enter the underworld and are tricked into a few torturous scenarios by the evil Xibalban lords. Failing to negotiate their way through the last trick, the two brothers are killed by the Lords. One Hunahpu's head is removed and thrown into a tree, which immediately

grows fruit. (One interesting mythological feature here is that the calabash tree yields a fruit that looks like a human head, which the Maya would instantly have connected to their origin.) The Lords forbid anyone to touch the fruit of this tree—an interesting connection might be made for some students to the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden! One of the evil lords has a daughter named Blood Moon who talks to the skull of One Hunahpu. The skull spits into her hand and she becomes pregnant. Her father orders her killed, but she convinces the executioners to spare her. She emerges in the upper world and seeks out her mother-in-law, who, after being convinced that Blood Moon is indeed carrying her son's children, takes her in. She gives birth to the Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque.

This genealogy given, the story picks up with the twins competing for attention with their half-brothers, One Monkey and One Artisan. The twins literally make monkeys out of their half-brothers, even though the younger boys try to rectify their mistake. They become, in the mythology, prototypical tree monkeys. The boys trick their grandmother into leaving the house, so that they can get their hands on a ball and some ball playing "uniforms" which she had put out of reach, having lost two sons to ball playing already. Soon, they are playing ball like their father, and invite a command performance/match from the Lords of Xibalba.

At this point, the boys have to endure a series of tricks a few of which their father was subjected to; but they outwit the evil lords at every turn. It becomes increasingly clear that cleverness is a highly-valued personality trait to the Maya. The boys learn the names of the evil Lords by using a mosquito emissary. Knowing their names upon entry to Xibalba gives them an advantage, and an initial power that their father failed to secure. This plot element has high relevance to high schoolers, if they read it as the triumph of youth over their parents—another theme that emerges in this tale. In the Bat House, one of the locales for the Lords' tricks, the twin Hunahpu makes a mortal mistake when he peeks out of his hiding place in his blowgun to see if dawn has come. He literally loses his head on account of sloppy thinking. The Xibalbans believe they have won, take Hunahpu's head as a trophy, and look forward to defeating his brother in the planned grudge match. But clever Xbalanque summons a group of animals and asks them to bring their food to him. The coati (a kind of raccoon) rolls a squash to Xbalanque, who fixes it onto his brother's body as a head. He warns his pumpkin-headed brother to avoid playing ball on the court, and instructs a rabbit to run after a ball he will kick out of the court, so that he can pull a switcheroo with his brother's head. He reattaches Hunahpu's head to his body, but their days are numbered.

When the Lords return from the chase, they are furious at finding the boys whole again, and it becomes clear that the brothers will be killed. The boys consult two prophets, who are really Xipyacoc and Xmucane, their great grandparents in disguise, and arrange for the burned, crushed remains of the twins to be thrown into a river, where they are reconstituted. They return to Xibalba, when the evil lords learn of this magic, but they return unrecognized as the twins. The boys entertain the Xibalbans with their magic, and ultimately trick them. They take turns killing each other as a magic feat, and then bring themselves back to life. When the Xibalbans ask the boys to perform the trick on them, they oblige, but do not bring the chief lords, One and Seven Death, back to life. They are victorious against the forces of evil. They defeat the enemy! And a happier ending never existed, because the boys locate their father and uncle in the underworld, decree that from then hence, all noble people will honor their memory, upon which the boys themselves "ascend into heaven" owners of the moon and the sun, accompanied by the 400 boys whom Hunahpu and Xbalanque had avenged.

Reading of the texts is largely the responsibility of individual students, but I meet with each group separately at the outset to render a portion of their part of the tale orally. The reason for this is that it establishes a clear narrative voice for students, which is especially critical in this piece on account of its strange point-of-view. Also, students who are not proficient readers are sometimes helped in the establishment of that voice. Finally,

since within their teams students are allowed to read to each other, doing this oral reading creates a model for them.

Students are told to record two things while they are reading: a paraphrase of any action that takes place in the tale; and a statement of what they think each identified action says to them about what seems to be important to the people who hold this story in esteem. In other words, what do the actions in these stories tell students about the people who tell the stories. This reading and recording process is completed in two days.

Following are the distinct literary considerations made of the *Popol Vuh*. As a whole class, direct instruction is given to refresh students' memories about basic definitions of terms, with model examples from the myth, after reading is completed. Individuals in each team are assigned the three specific tasks of locating and recording evidence of these elements. For example, student A has the task of recording character traits and evidence of characterization methods of the major players in his part of the tale. The same student determines the point of view taken in the tale. Every student is responsible, in addition to his two literary features, for formulating a thematic statement that he is convinced applies to the whole portion of the myth he has read. A variety of recording instruments (handouts, organizers, etc.), and other materials (scissors, glue tape, colored markers, construction paper, clay, etc.) are provided to the team for the various tasks. Given limitations on the latter, students will be encouraged to locate and bring to class materials they might need that are not available.

Characterization

Students charged with contributing to the team effort information about characters must produce several pieces of information. First, he must represent, in two or three dimensions, one major character in one specific situation in the story. This may take any form, from stick drawing to diorama, but it will include a brief description of the scene, as well as a statement about the nature of the character's *personality* as revealed in that part of the story. Second, a decision must be made and recorded as a statement about what predominant method(s) of characterization is (are) used, namely direct or indirect characterization, and appropriate evidence of that method. For example, if the character is a predominant speaker, the student will provide evidence of that speech.

Point-of-view

Since the unusual voice of the persona in this tale is that of one who is pointing, as if to live action, responses to the prompt to identify a first or third person narrator are likely to be interesting. While narration is in the third person, it seems that the speaker is referring to live action at times, and at other times is more detached and omniscient. But the task of this team member is to try to nail it down and to provide an example of how they determined what they believe the point of view is.

Figurative Language

Students assigned this task for the team must look for three specific examples of an action, character, event or object that he sees metaphorically. A specific description of what the action or event is being likened to must be supplied. Instances of metaphor, simile, symbolism, or personification are the only figures of language expected from them.

Tone

In addition to the identification of tone as described by words of emotion, students assigned this task are expected to look for one instance of irony in their assigned text. They produce a complete written explanation of how this irony reveals itself, either dramatic—revealed in a specific event where the reader is aware of something that the characters are not—or irony of situation, where the expected result of an action or a situation is not that which one would expect. The direct instruction preceding this task includes an explanation of the ironic device of parody, so that scenes like the conversion of One Monkey and One Artisan into tree monkeys can be identified as parodies of both the characters themselves, and of people in general who share their personality traits.

Plot Structure

It is the task of this student to record in fair detail the sequence of events in his selection, and to be able to describe the phases of these events. In a simplified formula, students are asked in a printed guide for this task to record those events which "set up" the action, those events that aggravate the situation and create tension, and the event to which all of these others lead, namely the culminating or climactic event. Of major interest will be the ballgames of the third part of the story. The game as a metaphor for the struggle between the forces of good and evil for the future of man is not only a key piece for students who deal with the events of the story, but important for students in tasked with figurative language, theme, and audience and purpose. On this last score, no pun intended, students need to ask how the action and stage of a ballgame would resonate with a Maya audience. Answers will come abundantly for those students who later choose the ballgame as a topic of research, since the sport reaches back into Maya history as an "allegory for warfare," as well as "connections with rites of fertility and a replication of astronomical cycles. . ." and thus, "a metaphor for life and death" (Uriarte).

Audience and Purpose

Whom do the students assigned this task think is the intended audience? The team member with this task must provide an answer to this question as well as to the question of what purpose the story serves for that narrator. Since they already have a notion about what a myth is and how it functions, I expect some interesting responses to this question, in terms of how this tale describes the values, traditions, and ideals of the people whose story this is. It is worth pointing out again here that students have been purposely kept in the dark as to who these people are. Chances are very slim that students will search terms like Quiche to determine which civilization the tale refers to. And even if a student identifies the Maya, the research still to come in the unit fleshes out this gross identification.

Theme

The single most important product in the analysis of a work of literature is a succinct, defensible statement of its relevance to humanity. This is theme. One student is charged with this task, and must not only determine for himself what the sustaining thread of universal meaning is, but must solicit and record a similar statement from each of his teammates. This student's report will reflect the consensus of his 4-person team.

So, when do all of the separate stories come together? Each team has analyzed its particular part of the story, and as a result of their analyses can be considered to be "expert." The next step in this design is to link the stories together, so students can see the whole picture. The student in each team who has been assigned the plot structure task is now called upon to represent his team in a panel drawn from all four (or five) groups, in a round robin retelling of their part of the tale. This is done for the whole class and the retelling takes place in the sequence that the tale follows. Reading from his or her account, each student retells his part. Classmates

are encouraged to ask questions of the panelists, so that in a general way every student knows the chief events in the book. I end this session with a summary of the part of the story they have not read, which is essentially a genealogy of the Quiche people. All of this teamwork centered on literary study is conducted over the course of three blocks (270 minutes), including coached reading at the outset, and home reading assignments.

Research Initiatives

Students are then returned to the work they completed in the comparative myth activity at the beginning of the unit. Now they ask: What have these tales told me about the people who share and hold on to them? Specifically, what did they seem to believe about how they came to be? What personal qualities do the students think they have as a result of their beginnings? What seems to be important to them? Why did their creators make them in the first place, and what does it seem their purpose on earth is? If people want to be like their creators, what do students think will make them good or bad people? Students work as a team in answering these questions about the *Popol Vuh*, then they share in a team panel their answers.

Once students make these inferences, in a brief period of direct instruction (20 to 30 minutes), I reveal the basic history of the Ancient Maya people through the Postclassic period. Students are given a list of key words and phrases (Appendix A) that will help them to find information in our local university library database (available to every student in the state), and over the Internet, including sites that I have located which are likely to provide useful answers, images, maps, or other visual or textual material. (While I have the luxury of teaching in a classroom with networked computers, I realize that not every teacher does. The Internet search, and indeed any hard documentary research, could be done ahead of time by the teacher, and resources could be made available to teams in a class period or two.) The sketch of Maya history I provide for students takes the form of a timeline, ending with the tenth century. The information contained in this traditional lecture setup is drawn from Tedlock (1995) and from McKillop (2004).

Students will be required to develop three research questions based on their inferences about actual historic events, places, and beliefs in the Maya saga, about the geography of the lands comprising the old empire, and about the language the Maya spoke. For example, a student may be curious about the designation of the calabash tree as the nesting place for One Hunahpu's head, which an investigation of the calabash gourd would reveal is both an explanation of the visual appearance of the fruit, and its likely importance as a source of food. Also, students are encouraged to ask questions about agriculture, and the art and architecture of the Maya. A list of resources at the end of this unit details not only key search words, but sites and sources that I have located to help students answer these questions (Appendix A). The answers to these questions may come in several forms. Students can download images, write out answers, design a brief PowerPoint slideshow, or create any other format to share their findings.

As a culminating activity, teams will re-form and share their findings with their teammates. Members of the four or five person team will identify the one most compelling research result from each student. Having done this, the team will organize a presentation of those results for the rest of the class. Following the reporting out of each team, a class discussion of the *Popol Vuh* takes place, following the order above in terms of the literary considerations, but with the participants drawing attention to the research findings, as rationales for why characters act the way they do, or why certain animals keep occurring in the tale, or why corn plays such a central role in the myth. As a recreational vehicle, but also as a cultural review, students are directed to "The Sport of Life and Death: The Mesoamerican Ballgame," which is a website where they can play a kind of ballgame, whose successful moves depend on their answering questions correctly on the subject of many

cultures across the Yucatan, including the sites of the Maya. Scores earned in this game will count as a formative assessment.

A final act in this unit is a screening of *Popol Vuh: The creation of the Maya* (1989), an animated feature which uses images from Maya excavations and imagery to tell a truncated version of the myth. Students watch the film according to a viewing "protocol," which not only elicits responses to literary elements, but focuses them on cinematic details (Appendix B).

Assessments

Formative Assessment

All of the written records of the work of individual team members are assessed as the unit progresses, for indications of progress toward the goal of mastery of the literary concepts. Additionally, the scores from the "Sport of Life and Death. . ." website will also count modestly as an assessment, and a completed viewing protocol (Appendix B) will be evaluated for students' comprehension of the key literary features.

Summative Assessment

An essay of literary evaluation, already a writing portfolio requirement in my school district, is the summative evaluation for this unit. In this evaluative writing task, students must determine standards against which to judge a particular work for aspects of its literary value. Since this district assessment also provides a choice to students of either a work of literature or a film, students will choose either the translation of *Popol Vuh*, or the animated film. The elements of evaluation may be slightly different, but the content and the background gained through research provides plenty of rich supporting material.

Lesson Plans

Lesson 1. Elements of the myth. (This is the opening lesson of the unit.)

Objectives

The instructional objectives of this lesson are to engage students in generalizing the basic elements of a myth and to enable them to realize that basic elements of cultural identity are revealed in myths.

Materials

The materials needed for this lesson include:

- A handout containing creation myths from 4 cultures (see bibliography for websites)
- T-Chart organizer (paper divided into 2 vertical columns) Chart paper and markers

Procedure

The students are organized into teacher-determined teams of four. Students who resist reading, or are reluctant for any reason to engage in activities like this, are grouped together and provided the shortest

reading, or the one most easily interpreted. Each student in the team is handed a separate myth, and asked to read it. When all have finished, the teacher gives a very broad description of mythical accounts of creation, saying only that most people around the world seem to have stories, some magical, some scientific, about how human beings have come to be.

Students are then asked to retell to their three team members, in their own words, the stories from the different cultures they have been assigned. When this activity is finished, students work as a team to complete a T-chart (a dual column organizer), on one side of which they note similarities among the myths as to characters, natural phenomena, individual objects, and supernatural occurrences. This is a good time for the teacher to float from team to team and assist and groups that are stuck. When all are finished, one member of the team records on chart paper one similarity and one difference that the team considers to be the most important or attractive. When done, charts are posted on the wall, and another team member takes the class through their charts and

When the charts are completed, students are asked to think about and try to answer any of these prompts, which the teacher reads aloud: What do the people in these cultures seem to believe about how they came to be? What qualities do they share as a people? What seems important to them? Why does the creator in the these tales make people in the first place? Do the people have a reason to be there? If people want to be like their creators, what would a good person be like, and what would a bad person be like?

After a discussion of these questions, the teacher simply says that he is handing out four different parts of a real mythical story, told by people whom he will not name. The teacher encourages students not to "cheat" by trying to find out who the people are, because it is a good idea to approach the task as if the students were scientists, in other words, trying not to be very biased when they start the study. For the end of this class, the teacher hands out the four parts of *Popol Vuh*—one to each team member—and reads the first lines of each aloud. Students are asked to put the writing away and to bring it the second day, without peeking.

Lesson 2. Literary Study.

(This lesson occurs midway through the unit, after students have completed the reading of their parts of the tale, but before they record responses to their individual tasks.)

Objectives

The first instructional objective of this lesson is to review the basic definitions of the literary focus of the study: theme, tone, point-of-view, plot structure, audience and purpose, and figurative language.

The second objective is to prompt students to look for discrete identification of the various elements in *Popol Vuh*, so that they can make statements about how it functions as a story. They must support their statements with evidence from the story.

Materials

Students will need:

- an organizer and note-taking paper that will provide a brief reminder of what their individual literary focuses are, and directions for locating places in their texts where there is evidence supporting character features,
- characterization techniques, point-of-view, figures of speech, tone, and plot structure.

- handouts with basic literary definitions, charts for recording instances of
- methods of characterization, character profiles, tone, and figures of language
- model statements of narrative point-of—view, and a place to comment on and support students' understanding of this feature in the myth
- a traditional plot structure diagram for the student charged with determining the structure of the story

Procedure

Students are seated in teams of four. Each member is assigned his or her tasks after direct instruction refreshes memory about the meaning of each literary concern. (The assumption is that by twelfth grade, students are familiar with these basic literary features, and need only a quick refresher.)

Each member is then regrouped with his or her peer in another team comprised of those given the same responsibilities in their home teams, forming what are called "expert" teams. These students work collaboratively to complete their common tasks. In a ninety-minute block, this activity should take about forty-five minutes.

Experts return to their home teams to compile and share their results. When this has been completed, the team determines how they will present their results to the whole class. This presentation may take many forms. Students may decide to elect one presenter, or they may individually present, or they may create a mini-drama to present key notions. A list of possibilities for presentation is provided at this time, and teams must decide on the format, determine individual contributions, and determine a timeline for completion and presentation to the whole group. (This presentation must occur in the latter part of the second week.)

Lesson 3. Research

Objectives

The instructional objectives for this lesson are to enable students to conduct effective documentary and Internet research, and to develop answerable research questions.

Materials

Students need:

- access to the Internet, either as a group, or individually
- a list of key words, phrases, and topics for searching both Internet and library resources is also needed (Appendix A). Copies of McKillop's *The Ancient Maya* (2004), Mann's *1491* (2006), and Miller and Taube's *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion* (1993) are provided through the library or in the classroom.

Procedure

In their base teams, students divide the broad categories for research among themselves: Maya history, architecture, agriculture, geography, language, religion, art, and mythology. Each student develops 2 specific questions in his or her category, and conducts a search to find answers by means of scholarly work, imagery, or Internet sites.

Students share questions and answers with teammates and the whole class as a research component of their

class presentation on the *Popol Vuh*. (This presentation will have been scheduled for the latter part of the second week of study.) Students should have a ninety-minute block to complete this research.

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