

Everybody Loves a Great Story: Mythology and the Oral Tradition

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INTRODUCTION

It is my belief that the very best teachers are great storytellers; in my own academic experience, the teachers who had the most profound influence on me were the ones who told the best stories.

Imagine my thrill when I saw Dr. Merrilee Cunningham's Mythology seminar listed as a 2007 HTI offering! I had the good fortune to be one of Dr. Cunningham's Advanced Shakespeare students at UHD; I knew that she also taught Mythology at the undergraduate level and mused that someday I would love to take that course. HTI presented just such an opportunity this past spring! In this seminar I had the opportunity to hear some of the greatest stories ever from one of the greatest storytellers. What an irresistible combination!

As an ESL teacher in HISD, I am always looking for new ways to motivate my second language learners. My curriculum unit's main thrust would be second language literacy, with teacher read aloud as the main attraction. All four language arts strands will be addressed: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. I believe I can successfully integrate all of the necessary language acquisition strategies within this type of presentation. The topic of mythology will virtually guarantee a high level of student engagement. The stories will provide a springboard for reading and writing workshop activities designed specifically to enhance student second language development. My ESL students are of Mexican extraction exclusively; whenever possible I will make serious effort to establish cultural connections for them.

OBJECTIVES: TEKS Chapter 110.4

- (3) Listening/speaking/appreciation. The student listens, enjoys, and appreciates spoken language. The student is expected to: (A) listen to proficient, fluent models of oral reading, including selections from classic and contemporary works (4-8);
- (4) Listening/speaking/culture. The student listens and speaks both to gain and share knowledge of his/her own culture, the culture of others, and the common elements of cultures. The student is expected to: (B) compare oral traditions across regions and cultures (4-8)
- 19) Writing/writing processes. The student selects and uses writing processes for self-initiated and assigned writing. The student is expected to: (A) generate ideas and plans for writing by using such prewriting strategies as brainstorming, graphic organizers, notes, and logs (4-8); (B) develop drafts by categorizing ideas, organizing them into paragraphs, and blending paragraphs within larger units of text (4-8); (C) revise selected drafts by adding, elaborating, deleting, combining, and rearranging text (4-8).
- 11) Reading/literary response. The student expresses and supports responses to various types of texts. The student is expected to: (A) offer observations, make connections, react, speculate, interpret, and raise questions in response to texts (4-8).

RATIONALE

My 4th grade ESL students are transitioning to instruction that is completely in English for the very first time. Many are recent arrivals; others have been taught through our school's bilingual education program. Testing demands are daunting; by February my students must take and pass a writing test that requires a working knowledge of English grammar and composition. It is my task each year to make this transition as smooth as possible by immersing my students in the four language arts strands of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. My recipe for success demands a high level of student interaction: the more students use and manipulate language, the easier second language acquisition is for them. For this reason, I try to choose high interest material that will immediately engage them; using well-written stories and high quality children's literature has always proven to be the most pleasurable way to achieve the language goals. Because the students love the stories, the skills embedded in the tasks are fun and exciting for them. Using children's literature allows me to do my best "sneaky teaching" – when students are learning and don't even know it! That the students will respond I am sure; I have dabbled in Greek mythology using the Club Chronicle series and the students have always wanted more. Although I did my best to supplement the series with classroom library selections, I (and maybe the students too) found my approach wanting. What I needed was a comprehensive and organized unit instead of the piecemeal approach I was using. Thanks to this Mythology seminar, next year's students will be able to enjoy a unit that is specifically tailored to their interests and needs.

UNIT BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

I envision a three-week curriculum unit that would begin with a general historical overview of mythology. Questions to be considered during this section are: What is a myth? How does mythology differ from other like genres such as tall tales, legends, and fables? Are certain myths peculiar to certain groups of people? Do some cultures share similar versions of one particular type of myth? (i.e. creation? redemption?)

Part 2 of my unit would explore Greek Mythology. I have dabbled lightly in this topic with students in the past using the Houston Chronicle's *Club Chronicle* series, and student interest is always high! The most immediate benefit derived from stories published in this format is the side by side translations in English and Spanish. English language learners of Hispanic background may use the resource to cross reference from Spanish to English when necessary. This greatly enhances comprehension by providing a visual tool for locating cognates in English and Spanish, a vocabulary building activity that accelerates second language acquisition. While Part 1 of my unit will introduce students to mythology in general; Part 2 will focus on the Greek Myths. Using Dauliere's visually enticing *Book of Greek Myths* as well as *The Macmillan Book of Greek Gods and Heroes*, by Alice Low, students will be introduced to these wonderful stories that contain all of the elements of a Mexican novella: humor, vengeance, grief, jealousy, love, infatuation, etc. Students will be guided through lesson plans that explore grammar concepts, such as concrete and abstract nouns, cognate related vocabulary building exercises, and comprehension strategies that are all designed with the second language learner in mind. Zeus's family tree alone would offer a great way to teach advance organizer study skills to my students!

Finally, no study of Greek myths would be complete without some drama! I am hoping that my students will enjoy dressing up like gods and goddesses for some fun with Reader's Theatre. We'll assign parts and take turns pretending to be gods and mortals, and then wind things up with a Greek Festival and a Feast fit for the gods. With an emphasis on food and beverages that are specific to certain myths (pomegranates, olives, apples, ambrosia, and grape juice for wine!) we can let our taste buds make some memorable language connections indeed!

Part 3 of my unit would be devoted to mythology specifically involving the Hispanic culture. The study of myths from two indigenous groups in Mexico (Aztec and Mayan) would provide a high interest, cultural connection for my students.

Part 1

What is Mythology?

It had been my intent to begin this unit with a clear definition of mythology, complete with examples and specifics as to how myths differ from legends and folktales. What began as an innocent, simple exercise resulted in the realization that defining these genres is not an easy task. Because they are labels that are often used interchangeably, definitions vary. However, most resources I consulted generally agreed (as does Dr. Cunningham) that myth involves ancient stories grounded in the sacred. Legends, while also old stories, tend to be based, however loosely, on some historical event. Folktales are entertaining stories borne from the oral tradition and have been handed down through generations of a particular culture. All, however, are part of the oral tradition of storytelling, in which the stories are not written down but memorized by the tellers/keepers of the tale.

Since the emphasis in this unit is on mythology, this general definition above should be sufficient to satisfy this part of the unit discussion. My children will learn that myths generally fall into one of two categories:

1. As an explanation for a phenomenon whose cause is not easily or readily explained.
2. As a means of providing a value system or set of cultural norms for a society.

It will be important at this point to emphasize that all cultures and countries have their own mythologies, and many are similar.

I plan to introduce this portion of the unit study with some video clips from www.unitedstreaming.com. HISD provides PK-12 district-wide access to this valuable teacher's resource; I often use video clips with my ESL students to generate interest and to draw in the reluctant learner. One particular clip, entitled, *World History: Ancient Civilizations*, will provide an excellent introduction to the word of mythology and its purpose in the culture of a people. Although it is geared toward the older student (grades 6-12), I believe there is enough material presented in a highly entertaining visual format to engage my students and justify its use for the slightly younger English language learner.

Part 2

The Greeks

I have chosen to introduce my students to the world of mythology by beginning with the Greeks. My ESL students will most likely be unfamiliar with even the most common tales; at the very least they will not be familiar with the English translations. I think it best suits my students' needs to help lay the foundation by beginning with the most familiar and accessible stories.

To launch this study, I have chosen to use the History Channel DVD entitled *In Search of History: The Greek Gods*. Though lengthy (60 minutes) and obviously intended for a mature audience, it is a most entertaining visual introduction to the world of Greek myth. Zeus's and Hera's sexual conquests are explored, but the subject matter is handled with discretion. There is plenty of information and visually appealing imagery to warrant its use with a student audience. I do recommend that any teacher using this DVD view it before deciding to show it; I leave it up to individual teachers to edit where they feel it is necessary. There are other video options for those who feel this DVD is too sophisticated; www.unitedstreaming.com has some cartoon and child-centered clips that might be more appropriate for a teacher worried about losing her giddy ten-year-olds when "the naked people" are on the screen!

After we view this video, I will present my students with a family tree of the gods and goddesses—a sort of “Who’s Who in Greek Mythology.” I have recently begun using advance organizers with my students with excellent results. Normally this format works well with science study, especially when a large amount of material (such as scientific concepts or terminology) is required for mastery. In this particular case, having a visually formatted overview of Zeus’s family tree will help students to see an organized chronology of characters before we read individual stories.

The Myths

Demeter and Persephone

Students will be introduced to this myth as a type that explains scientific phenomena that puzzled the ancient Greeks: the changing of the seasons. Demeter, the Earth goddess, has a beautiful daughter, Persephone. All is well on earth until the god of the Underworld, Hades, decides to kidnap Persephone and take her as his bride. Demeter is devastated at the loss of her lovely daughter and searches endlessly for her. Demeter’s distraction causes all living things on earth to suffer from her neglect. A shepherd has seen the abduction and tells Demeter that a chariot from the Underworld snatched Persephone. Demeter now knows where Persephone is, and she prevails upon Zeus to return her daughter. Zeus, reluctant to interfere, but aware that all creatures on earth are mortally endangered by Demeter’s neglect, dispatches Hermes to fetch the young girl. However, it is impossible to return anyone to earth once he or she has eaten of the food of the underground. Although Persephone’s depression prevented her from doing so, just that morning she had eaten six pomegranate seeds, and Hermes is dismayed to find he cannot retrieve her. Zeus intervenes by ruling that Persephone must remain with Hades; she must spend one month every year for the number of seeds she has eaten. Thus, when Persephone is reunited with her mother, the earth is fertile and productive; in the months she must return to Hades, all is barren.

Activity

Since this will be the first read aloud myth, I think my students will enjoy using the mini-book reproducibles to create their own take home versions of this myth. At this point in the unit, my emphasis will be on student practice of oral reading and fluency skills; the comic book’s cartoon-like illustrations have kid appeal and should provide a non-threatening beginning to our Greek Mythology study for my English language learners.

Arachne

This is the story of a boastful young weaver who claims to have skills that are superior to Athena’s. She chooses to compete with Athena in a weaving contest. Athena is outraged by this mortal’s audacity, but even more insulted when Arachne weaves a scene that depicts the gods as vain, deceitful, and jealous. Although Athena cannot bring herself to admit it, the mortal’s skills are only slightly inferior to her own. In a rage, Athena destroys Arachne’s weaving and strikes her with the loom. At that instant, Arachne begins to shrink to the size of a tiny bug. She sprouts eight legs, and black hair covers her body. Fearfully, she scurries to the highest spot she can find and begins to weave a delicate web; she is destined to forever weave not as a mortal, but as the world’s first spider.

Activity

It seems a natural choice to have my students compare and contrast the characters of the two weavers in this myth. I think a Venn diagram will be useful here. As the two have much in common, children will easily see that the biggest difference is simply that one is an all-powerful goddess, and one is simply mortal. Will my students conclude that Arachne has it coming to her

or that Athena is unnecessarily cruel? An informal oral debate is what I hope develops here; as students practice their oral language skills, the Venn diagram will help them to conduct a meaningful class discussion.

Cupid and Psyche

Cupid is the son of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty. He is responsible for arranging love affairs by means of his special arrows. Once pricked, a victim falls in love with the next creature/being he sees. Because mortal Psyche is so astonishingly beautiful and has an enormous following of admirers, Aphrodite grows jealous, especially since she realizes that mortals consider Psyche's beauty to exceed her own. She commands Cupid to arrange for Psyche to fall in love with an ugly creature by striking her with one of his arrows. As Cupid attempts to carry out his mother's orders, he is struck by Psyche's beauty and accidentally pricks himself. He falls in love with her, which also prevents any other man from doing so. Lovely but unloved, Psyche consults an oracle who explains that her lover awaits her atop a mountain; she must go there and fulfill her destiny. Her beloved is good, kind, and adoring, and requires only that she never look at him. Psyche accepts this until her jealous sisters visit and convince her that he must be a monster planning to destroy her. Persuaded by her sisters, Psyche dares to look at Cupid while he sleeps. A drop of oil from the lamp falls on him and he awakens. Because Psyche has betrayed his trust, and trust is the foundation of love, Cupid leaves Psyche alone and brokenhearted.

There is another version of this myth, one in which Psyche enlists the aid of Ceres to appeal to Aphrodite for help in getting Cupid to return to her. Aphrodite sets forth a series of challenges, and Psyche accomplishes them all. Her final task takes her to the Underworld where she is given a box said to contain the treasure of divine beauty. She must deliver it, unopened, to Aphrodite. On the way home she cannot help herself; once again she is overcome by curiosity. As she opens the box a great black cloud escapes and Psyche falls to the ground, unconscious. Fortunately, she is found by Cupid, who offers her a drink from water that will make her immortal. Once immortal, she is no longer considered unworthy by the gods, and the lovers are permitted to live happily ever after.

Frankly, I prefer the first version of this myth, but since the *Chronicle* format uses the latter, I will offer both selections to my students. Having two selections to compare will easily stimulate discussion, and students will be asked to venture opinions about how two such different versions of this myth occurred. Keeping in mind that these would have been orally told, what could have been the teller's motive for the creation of the happier ending? Why did Cupid take pity on poor, unconscious Psyche? Was it because she had labored so hard to win him back? What does this say about storyteller license? Which version, do you suppose, did the Greek audience prefer? And finally, which version do my students prefer?

Activity

This myth is chock full of teaching possibilities! Because it is such a compelling story (and will likely remind my students of *Beauty and the Beast*), it will be the perfect time for me to introduce some normally boring grammar activities into our myth study. Since I intend to use the side by side bilingual version of the story published in the *Houston Chronicle*, it will be a natural extension to have students examine both sets of text to make language comparisons. Like vocabulary, grammar learned in context is not only more enjoyable, but more meaningful to the learner. It is here that I will point out some of the basic differences in the two languages ('s vs. "de"; adjective / noun vs. noun / adjective; and single vs. double negatives). Students will cross reference and circle examples of the English and Spanish grammar differences. Because students will have their own reproduced copies of this myth, these will become portable literacy tools for at home study.

Pandora's Box

Pandora is a mortal woman created by Prometheus at the direction of Zeus. She receives the gift of beauty from Aphrodite, knowledge of the arts from Athena, and from Zeus, a shiny golden box which she is forbidden to open. (This is because Zeus is furious that Prometheus has given humans the gift of fire without asking his permission.) Knowing that curiosity is an overwhelming human compulsion, Zeus is sure Pandora cannot keep his commandment. He's right, of course, and although it takes some time, Pandora eventually succumbs and attempts to satisfy her curiosity by opening the box. To her horror, out fly all of the miseries that would torment humankind forevermore: old age, vanity, deceit, distrust, etc. Pandora quickly closes the lid before Despair escapes. Because Despair is still contained, humankind still has Hope.

I have read two popular versions of this myth and each ending is slightly different. One ends as I have cited above. The other ends with Hope left as the last spirit in the box. I suppose it really doesn't matter, except to raise the question as to why there are two different endings. Is it simply a matter of the "glass being half empty or half full?" Or, is one a more logical ending than the other? It makes more sense that Despair is what is finally contained; all the other spirits were negative ones. What would Hope be doing in there? Because Despair is the absence of Hope, however, the net effect is the same. It remains to be seen if my students will find this quandary of mine worthy of discussion, but I do think that it could be an interesting topic for older students.

Activity

This is the perfect myth with which to practice some "sneaky teaching." Abstract nouns are difficult even for the native speaker, but they are especially difficult concepts for the ESL students. Because ESL students rely so much on visual clues and concrete objects to make language connections, abstracts are a special challenge. "Pandora's Box" is full of only abstract nouns, and so this myth is a painless way to study them. Using a very basic definition of concrete nouns as things I can perceive with my senses, and abstract nouns as those which I cannot, students will be lead through an exercise which helps them to practice using both types of nouns. (Ex. I can see the **box**. I cannot see **curiosity**, but I can see Pandora's twitching fingers playing with the lock.)

The Festival

Students will be told that the festival is for gods and goddesses only. In addition to dressing like the immortals, my children will choose a Greek god or goddess to research and represent at the Festival. In this part of the study, they will have opportunities to use the Internet (our school is blessed to be a technology magnet, and so laptops are very accessible to the kids) to learn about their chosen character, and develop an oral report and presentation for their fellow classmates. This is an activity that can be great fun! I used it with older students (7th and 8th graders) many years ago. Creativity will be stressed, and students will be encouraged to make props and scenery; in writing workshop they will use their research notes to create a report that will both teach and entertain their audience. Like the ancient storytellers, they will draw upon what they have learned about the oral tradition — that the joy is in the telling and the hearing, for the stories are well known to the listener.

The Feast

In my experience teaching ESL children, I have found that food tasting related to the stories is surprisingly effective for making language connections. Often we sample foods that are a part of our story, especially when those foods are given status equaling characters, as in the pomegranate from the Demeter myth. When students sample foods, they make sensory and mnemonic connections that can be quite powerful in second language acquisition experiences.

Students will learn basic facts about these foods and also about the magical/immortal powers the Greeks believed they gave.

Foods of the Gods

In my research I discovered an excellent book entitled, *Nectar and Ambrosia, an Encyclopedia of Food in World Mythology*, written by Tamra Andrews. It is from this source that I made the following food choices for our classroom feast.

Pomegranate

Students of Hispanic origin will know this fruit as the “Granada.” Indeed, the city of Spain was renamed for this fruit during its Moorish period. Although it is referred to in many myths (Hera wears its crown-like blossoms in her hair, the name of Orion’s bride, Side, means pomegranate), we know the pomegranate best as the fruit which stars in the Demeter myth. With its bright red color and many seeds, it is the food most often associated with fertility. Greeks associated the fruit with the underground, as it is the best representation of seeds that germinate underground, emerge into the light, and then return to death and darkness once again. I think that my students will clearly see why this fruit stars in the story originally told to explain the seasons. Although labor intensive for eating, the pomegranate’s sweet but tangy flavor burst makes it worth the effort!

Olives

Long a symbol of peace, the olive’s origin is credited to Athena, who in a contest with Poseidon struck the ground with her spear to have an olive tree spring up. Because Poseidon could only manage a horse, and the purpose of the contest was to see who could give mortals the best gift, the long-living, ever-producing olive tree won over the horse, the symbol of war. Olives represent victory over adversity (olives must be pressed to produce) and immortality. (They lived for centuries and even when felled, sent forth new shoots from their roots.) Being born under an olive tree signified divine ancestry (Apollo and Artemis, Romulus and Remus).

Honey

Sometimes synonymous with ambrosia, the dew that dripped from the heavenly regions and fortified the gods, honey was considered a divine substance. Neither liquid nor solid, and created by a mystical process not fully understood, it was the first sweetener and often an ingredient in intoxicating drinks. After Rhea hid Zeus from his father Chronus, Melissa supplied honey to the infant. Naturally, Dionysius, the vine god, is credited with its creation.

Ambrosia/Nectar

My research indicates that these liquids, when named by early mythmakers, were used interchangeably (Andrews 157). In Greek mythology, when they are referred to separately, nectar is a drink made from honey and fruit, and ambrosia is a water/barley mixture of fruit, olive oil, cheese, and honey. They are truly the foods of the gods and the source of their immortality. They flow miraculously and are forbidden to mortals; those mortals who dare to indulge suffer serious consequences. I cannot imagine even the bravest of my students willing to taste ambrosia made of the ingredients cited above. Therefore, for our purposes, that yummy Texas version of ambrosia known to all (whipped cream, fruit, coconut, pecans, and pudding) will be the version eaten at our feast. Fruit nectars are readily available at local grocers; we’ll have a variety on hand for sampling.

Figs

As a staple food for the Greeks, fig trees were an abundant and highly revered food source. A ready and available food for the poor, the trees were considered by all to be great providers.

Dionysus receives the first fruits of the annual harvest as a deferential offering to the god who is credited with introducing this food to the Greeks. My ESL students know them as “los higos,” but despite their plentitude in the Houston region, they are not commonly eaten by the Hispanic culture.

Apples

The Greeks tended to call many fruits apples; it seemed to be almost a generic term for fruit, especially an unusual one. Often they would name an unusual fruit after the city of origin followed by the word apple, as in Armenian apples (apricots) and Persian apples (citrus) (Andrews 8). Hence, some mythology experts think that Zeus’s wedding gift to Hera (the “golden apples” of the Garden of Hesperides) may have actually been oranges or some form of citrus. And of course there is the reference to the famous Apple of Discord, designated to be for “the fairest” and claimed by all of the members of that formidable trio, Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera. When the shepherd Paris must choose among these three based on their gift offerings, Aphrodite wins the apple as she bests the others with the gift of Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world. For this reason, the apple is linked with femininity, and because the apple’s interior resembles the female reproductive organs, also with fertility.

Grapes

When we think of Greek feasts, we must have grapes! Mental images of gods and lovers reclining while feeding and being fed grapes are common ones for readers of Greek mythology. According to the legend, Dionysus is credited with cultivating grapes and learning to make wine from a snake that he watched slithering among the grapevines and sucking the juices from the fruit. Early wine-making made use of hollow rocks upon which grapes were trampled, and Dionysus is credited with inventing this method. He is also credited with the feelings of euphoria that came with the drinking of this juice; at harvest time a celebration honoring the god began and lasted for days. While the “juice” produced only a temporary sense of joyful abandon, its impact was powerful enough to have the worship of Dionysus develop into a loyal cult. For the followers of Dionysus, this juice had the power to make them feel equal to the gods, and for many the addiction resulted in permanent madness.

The Olympic Games

If my guess is correct, I think my students will be thrilled with the idea of having our own Olympic contests. At this writing, I envision foot races, discus (Frisbee!) throwing and chariot (a student seated on two others!) races. Although we will try to keep this authentic, some differences will be stressed—girls **will** participate and everyone wears clothes!

Objects in the Sky

Our 4th grade Science curriculum dovetails nicely with this section of the unit. I imagine that our annual visit to the planetarium will be better appreciated if I teach this section immediately before our visit in November. The chronology of the Greek Gods will tie in nicely with the astronomy section of our “Objects in the Sky” Science unit. In the 4th grade, all HISD students take a field trip to the Museum of Natural Science. For my students, the planetarium exhibit is always the highlight! With a little bit of advance planning and the use of the information from this part of the unit, the children’s visit will be immeasurably enhanced, as we enjoy the simulated stargazing delight the planetarium show provides. The planetarium show outlines the constellations with live narration, and the students learn the connection between the astronomical/zodiacal representations in the sky with their mythological story counterparts.

Part 3

Mythology in Aztec and Mayan Culture

In an effort to help my students make cultural connections, I have decided to dedicate this segment of the unit to Aztec and Mayan roots of Mexican mythology. It will be interesting to note which students are familiar with these stories. Although my students all come from similar backgrounds in that they are recent arrivals, speak little to no English, and are from poverty level income homes, I find that their cultural experiences are varied. Some come from homes rich in oral traditions; others have virtually no experience with it. I do know from previous experiences, however, that I must tread cautiously when introducing the topic of Mexican mythology. I offer the same caveat to ESL teachers interested in using this part of the unit. To some children, these stories are real, and references to mythical characters as fictitious can produce emotional outbursts from those raised to believe in them. A recent discussion of La Llorona, the wailing woman of Mexican folklore, produced just such a reaction in my own class. Some children took great umbrage at the suggestion that La Llorona was “made up.” I gathered from the heightened response that this was more serious than my own Irish nana’s blaming the “little people” when various household items mysteriously went missing during my childhood. There was a darker, more serious overtone to the La Llorona story, and a superstitious reverence permeated the discussion. I learned quickly to begin subsequent lessons with, “Some people believe that this story is true; others do not,” and I offer this anecdote as a preventive means to avoid cultural insensitivity. Teachers may choose whether to do this or not when beginning this part of the unit.

I plan to focus on two myths in this section: The Fifth Aztec Sun, an Aztec creation myth, and Ix Chel, Goddess Moon, a Mayan myth. After having read both the Mayan and the Aztec creation myths, I realized that both are very complicated stories, involving the creation and destruction of several worlds, and both have characters that change forms and personalities many times over. I knew that my task for this section of the unit would be to find myths that are suitable for elementary children’s reading abilities and comprehension levels. Fortunately, there are many new children’s picture books devoted to these subjects. Because *Club Chronicle* has published “The Fifth Aztec Sun” as a two part serial in bilingual format, this will be the version that will be of most use for my ESL students. And although there are many excellent Mayan myths to choose from, I particularly liked the story of Ix Chel. It is just one of a collection of myths from *Changing Woman and Her Sisters, Stories of Goddesses from Around the World* retold by Katrin Hyman Tchana. This anthology is also a recently released (2007) children’s picture book whose theme is strong women of mythology. There is a second new release (also 2007) that is equally appealing entitled, *The Honey Jar*, written by Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu. There are wonderful illustrations by Domi, a well-known Mexican artist, and the collection of stories includes the Mayan Creation myth, entitled, “Grandfather Sun and Grandmother Moon Were Bored,” as well as “The Story of the Weasel Who Helped People Find Corn.” While Menchu has the sun and moon as co-creators of the world, Tchana tells the story of a rather dysfunctional union between a jealous husband and a strong-willed, though smitten, wife, and there is no reference to creation. My further research (*Mythology of the American Nations*) revealed that Ix Chel is not considered to be a creation goddess at all, but a rain goddess, a weaver, and one in charge of women, especially childbearing women. It remains to be seen which story my children will prefer, but I can imagine some lively discussions about both of these sun and moon stories. Since my intent in this section is to expose my children to Meso- American mythology in hopes that they can make relevant, cultural connections, I think these choices will more than meet my goal.

The Fifth Aztec Sun

According to this myth, the sun which shines over Mexico today is the 5th sun. Suns 1, 2, 3 and 4 were created and destroyed; this is the story of the 4th and 5th suns. The 4th sun, Chalchuitlicu, was a bright and hardworking sun, who took great pride in doing her job well. She was also a sensitive sun who became distraught when criticized by the god of darkness, Tezcatlipoca, for being selfish and proud. Although this criticism was undeserved, Chalchuitlicu shed great tears, which caused a massive flood and extinguished her light. Earth is now a cheerless place, and it is decided that two volunteers are needed to become the new sun and moon. They must be transformed by fire before they can assume their places in the sky. Tecucuztecatl, haughty and proud, immediately volunteers to be the new sun. Little Nana, ugly and meek, agrees to the lesser position of moon. As the ceremonial fires are lit, Tecucuztecatl, resplendent in his regal finery, approaches the fire first. Despite his bravado, he cannot summon the courage to leap into the fire. As his courage wanes, onlookers become impatient. Finally, Little Nana, with her plain garb and meek demeanor, strides bravely into the fire and is consumed. Tecucuztecatl, jealous of her courage, finally forces himself to jump in after her. Within moments, a huge eagle enters the fire and grasps a ball of flames in his beak. He soars heavenward and releases Little Nana, now the brightest and loveliest of the Aztec suns. A hawk then enters the fire and grasps a smaller ball of flames, far less bright than the eagle held. He flies heavenward and releases Tecucuztecatl, now the moon, who would sit forever in the shadow of the sun.

Activity

Because this myth is also presented in a side by side bilingual format, I will take the opportunity to help my students locate pairs of cognates as they cross reference between the two versions of the story. Ultimately, these cognate pairs will be listed and transferred to a student created cognate dictionary that they will use all school year. I know from experience that ESL students love cognates; learning about them seems to make the English language seem “friendlier” and more easily mastered. I recommend this activity for students with limited English vocabularies. In addition to the practical uses these dictionaries can provide, I find they really help to boost student confidence.

Ix Chel – Goddess Moon – A Mayan Myth

Ix Chel is a beautiful girl who is so skilled at weaving that she attracts the attention of the Sun. He woos her by pretending to be a skilled hunter; she falls in love with him despite her grandfather’s disapproval. When Sun proposes, Ix Chel accepts and together they ascend to shine brightly in the sky. Sun, however, is extremely possessive, and soon convinces himself that Ix Chel is in love with his brother, Morning Star, because they always seem to be together. His jealousy is his great tragic flaw, and it drives Ix Chel away. Sun follows her and woos her again, but no sooner is she back in the sky when he considers her relationship with the Cloud god suspect. Often she disappears behind the Cloud and cannot be seen. So consumed by jealous rage is the Sun that he hurtles rocks at Ix Chel, which results in permanent scarring. These craters he hopes will prevent other gods from becoming attracted to her. Ix Chel finally realizes that she can no longer abide Sun’s jealousy; they cannot live together. To this day, Sun roams the sky looking for Ix Chel. He never finds her, as she only comes out when he is sleeping. Though she waxes and wanes, there is always a part of her shining in the night sky.

There is a second version of this myth, told by Rigoberta Menchu in her anthology of Mayan bedtime stories, *The Honey Jar*. In this story, Grandfather Sun and Grandmother Moon are co-creators of the Earth and Heaven, and all of the creatures who inhabit them. This, according to the story, is because Grandfather Sun saw great sadness in Grandmother Moon’s face and wants only

to make her happy. He deduced that it was because she was lonely and bored with only his company for diversion, and so together they created all other living things.

While both myths do a very good job of retelling a story at a level best understood by children, I think that the story of Ix Chel will be the one my students find more entertaining. Nevertheless, because *The Honey Jar* is such a well done compilation of Mayan myths, I feel it deserves a place in this unit, if only as a selection offered to those students interested in further independent reading.

Unit Wrap up

I have decided to extend this unit for a few days beyond the initial three week plan to allow for a writing exercise that will involve a class project. As a group endeavor we will write an original myth of our own choosing. Some suggested topics might be:

1. Why do clouds turn black before it rains?
2. What is hail?
3. Why do skunks have white stripes?
4. Where do tornadoes come from?
5. Why do caterpillars turn into butterflies?

Together we will create our myth as we advance through all stages of the writing process. In small groups children will work to exchange ideas, offer suggestions, and refine the product in all of its stages. When we gather as a large group, we will assemble parts, edit, revise and rewrite until we have a finished product. I think the children will also enjoy illustrating this myth, and we can work to decide which parts are appropriate for visual representations. Doing a class project like this has always proven to be immensely rewarding for me and my students. Because there is something for everyone here, from the idea people, to the implementers, to the designers and illustrators, all stakeholders are involved and the classroom dynamics evolve, shift, and develop during the process and product. It can be a time-consuming project, as often these activities seem to take on a life of their own. However, the overall gain is always worth the effort expended.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan 1: Looking for Cognates

Objective: 4.11 (A) offer observations, make connections, react, speculate, interpret, and raise questions in response to texts (4-8)

Introduction: Students will listen attentively as story of “Cupid and Psyche” is read aloud.

Concept Development: After a brief discussion of the story content, students will be instructed to notice the side by side Spanish English versions of their student copies. They will be told that English and Spanish have many similar words, which look and sound nearly the same. Teacher will point out several pairs and ask for student volunteers to do the same.

Student Practice: Students will scan the story, circling pairs of English/ Spanish cognates.

Assessment: Student created dictionaries, in alphabetical listings, of their cognate pairs.

Closure: Students will be reminded that this is a great skill to use anytime they read in English. Knowing these cognates will greatly accelerate their learning of English vocabulary words.

Lesson Plan 2: What’s the Difference?

Objective: 4.19 (A) generate ideas and plans for writing by using such prewriting strategies as brainstorming, graphic organizers, notes, and logs (4-8); (B) develop drafts by categorizing ideas, organizing them into paragraphs, and blending paragraphs within larger units of text.

Introduction: Students will listen to the myth “Arachne,” as it is read aloud by teacher.

Concept Development: Students will be told that an effective way to analyze characters is to compare and contrast them. Arachne and Athena have similarities and differences. Using a Venn diagram, students will offer examples as a group diagram is begun.

Student Practice: Students will fill in and complete the Venn diagram contrasting and comparing Arachne’s and Athena’s characteristics.

Assessment: Using their Venn diagram as a guide, students will construct a rough draft paragraph, citing similarities and differences.

Closure: Students will be asked to answer the following question orally: Did Arachne have it coming to her or is Athena unnecessarily cruel?

Lesson Plan 3: Writing with Abstract and Concrete Nouns

Objective: 4.19 (C) revise selected drafts by adding, elaborating, deleting, combining, and rearranging text (4-8).

Introduction: Students will be told that one of the reasons we must elaborate in our writing is to allow the reader to “see” what we mean. Because the reader lacks visuals, we must provide them with our words.

Concept Development: Students will be given the definitions for abstract and concrete nouns (those that can be experienced by the senses or those that cannot.) Teacher will lead students through examples from the text of “Pandora’s Box.” Students will circle abstract and concrete nouns.

Student Practice: Using the following sentence starter, “I cannot see _____, but I can see _____,” students will write their own versions of abstract nouns using vocabulary from the story. (Example: “I cannot see curiosity, but I can see Pandora’s twitching fingers.”)

Assessment: Will be original oral student sentences, with teacher providing either an abstract or concrete noun.

Closure: Students will be reminded that elaboration makes writing interesting. Abstract notions are better understood when we can “see” them in our minds.

Lesson Plan 4: Be Possessive!

Objective 4. 11(A) offer observations, make connections, react, speculate, interpret, and raise questions in response to texts (4-8).

Introduction: Students will be told that the rules in grammar differ in English and Spanish. Today we will focus on possessives, and how to spot one in English. The obvious difference is the use of apostrophe “s” as opposed to the Spanish “de.”

Concept Development: Using their student copies of “The Fifth Aztec Sun,” students will search for possessives (‘s) in the English text of the story. They will then cross reference and find the comparable words in Spanish (de plus noun).

Student Practice: Will be oral. Students will practice their use of possessives when given a noun In English. Example: Mary= Mary’s; cat= cat’s

Assessment: Will be written. Students will generate a list of 10 English nouns in the possessive form.

Closure: Students will learn that this is not the only way the apostrophe is used in English, but it is an important one. We will soon learn another way when we study contractions.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited

- Andrews, Tamra. *Nectar and Ambrosia: an Encyclopedia of Food in World Mythology*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clío, Inc., 2000.
A wonderful resource for any mythology unit! Alphabetical listings of foods associated with all mythologies of the world with anecdotal references to deities, magical powers associated with foods, along with the historical/geographical significance of each food in different cultures.
- Blood, Danielle. *15 Greek Myth Mini-Books*. Instuctor Books, 2001.
This is a fabulous resource with reproducible comic-like mini books that kids can color and keep! Written for about a 3rd or 4th grade reader, I predict this to be a great find for the reluctant or beginning ESL reader.
- D'aulaire, Ingri, and Edgar Parin D'aulaire. *D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths*. New York: Dell, 1962.
A great foundational resource for any children's lit collection. Beautiful illustrations and easy to read text will make it a hit with students.
- In Search of History: The Greek Gods*. DVD. History Channel, 2005.
Although this DVD is geared toward the older audience, I plan to include it in my unit. It has much to offer in terms of background information, but I advise teachers to watch it first to judge its appropriateness for a particular student group.
- Jones, David M. and Brian Molyneaux. *Mythology of the American Nations: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*. London: Hermes House, 2004.
- Low, Alice. *The Macmillan Book of Greek Gods and Goddesses*. New York: Macmillan Co., 1985.
Similar to D'Auliere's collection, this is a nicely illustrated resource that will appeal to students from 4-6th grade.
- Menchu, Rigoberta. *The Honey Jar*. Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2006.
A lovely collection of the author's remembered bedtime stories. Nobel Peace Prize winner Menchu has teamed with illustrator Demi to compile these ancient Mayan tales.
- Molyneaux, Brian L. *The Mythology of the Americas: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Gods, Goddesses, Monsters and Mythical Places from North, South and Central America*. United Kingdom: Lorenz Books, 2003.
Though written for the adult reader, this is a valuable book for Meso American Mythology study. There are authentic illustrations and photographs that lend visual appeal to the alphabetical entries.
- Petersen, Mike, ed. "Cupid and Psyche." *Houston Chronicle* 17, 18, 19, 20 Nov. 2006.
A great resource for ESL teachers. Presented in a side by side English/Spanish format, the story is perfect for in context ESL grammar activities.
- Swiston, Marie, ed. "The Fifth Aztec Sun." *Houston Chronicle* 13, 20 Feb. 2005.
Another great Club Chronicle story, presented in a side by side English/Spanish format. This is a particularly good retelling of a complicated Mayan myth.
- Tchana, Katrin H. *Changing Woman and Her Sisters, Stories of Goddesses from Around the World*. New York: Holiday House, 2006.
A must have for any serious collector of children's lit! Of special significance is the strong women of mythology theme; goddess stories from all over the world are featured.
- World History: Ancient Civilizations. United Streaming*. Discovery Channel. 4 Feb. 2007
<www.unitedstreaming.com>.
A good resource for presenting an overview of ancient civilizations and their mythologies.

Supplemental Resources

- Evans, Cheryl, and Anne Millard. *Usborne Illustrated Guide to Greek Myths and Legends*. London: Usborne, 1985.
An excellent resource for students at about 3rd or 4th grade reading levels. With great illustrations, it is neatly divided by topics (creation, evil men, etc.). Of special note is the well organized glossary entitled "Who's Who in Greek Mythology." Here students can locate an entry and learn basic facts about gods, their classifications in the hierarchy, and their relationships to other gods and myths. Highly recommended!
- Weber, Belinda. *The Best Book of Ancient Greece*. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 2005.
This is a good book for Beginner level ESL students. Large, non-threatening print and enticing illustrations.
- Worth-Baker, Marcia. *Greek Mythology Activities: Activities to Help Students Build Background Knowledge about Ancient Greece, Explore the Genre of Myths, and Learn Important Vocabulary*. New York: Teaching Resources, 2005.
Another great offering from Scholastic. It is full of creative lesson ideas to make the study of Greek Mythology fun.