



Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Creation Myths and the “Big Questions”

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Abstract

This project is intended primarily to expose students to a selection of oral narratives in order to establish a literary context for the study of ancient civilizations in social studies. Students will read Mesopotamian, Indian, Chinese, Egyptian, Yoruba, Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman, Japanese, Mayan and Lenape creation myths, collecting answers to the “big questions” regarding the origins of the universe and the human race. Through the study of common symbols in creation myths, students will be able to identify the differences that give rise to unique societal values. After comparative group presentations, students will explore if and how these values have evolved, especially in relation to the relationship between humanity and the rest of the natural world.

Curricular Context

This project comprises the second unit in a 9th Grade Literature curriculum. The course is required for all students at Bronx Academy of Letters, and meets 5 days a week in 45-minute increments. BAL is a Title 1 public school located in the South Bronx neighborhood of Mott Haven; a significant percentage of the student body consist of residents in the local community. The average combined ELA and math score of incoming students signifies performances below grade level -- for that reason, students will be reading adapted excerpts from ancient texts to scaffold their reading skills.

This unit succeeds one entitled “‘Where I’m From’: Identity Poems”, which introduces students to examples of figurative language including similes, metaphors and personification. Student understanding of symbolism is deepened through the comparative study of 10 creation myths from different cultures. Stories are selected to correspond to the range of ancient civilizations studied in 9th Grade Global Studies (with the exception of the creation myth of the Lenape). Additionally, cross-curricular alignment with the Earth Science curriculum informs the environmental justice focus underlying the unit.

Why Study Creation Myths?

Marcelo Gleiser, an astrophysicist who works at Dartmouth college, asserts that "... in their variety... myths encompass all the logical answers we can give to the question of the origin of the Universe, including those found in modern theories of cosmology... [this] is evidence for a true universality in human thought" (3).

In his book *The Dancing Universe*, Gleiser defines myths in terms of both their format and function as "... stories that bring meaning and order to our existence... a valuable probe into the worldview and values of the particular culture" (7). He later adds that creation myths, specifically, "portray more effectively... how a given culture perceives and organizes the world around it" (8).

Interestingly, Gleiser warns against "trying to interpret a myth scientifically, or giving a myth scientific value" (8). He views this "common mistake" more stringently than that of readers allowing their own social values to cloud their interpretations of the myths of other cultures. In his text, he offers several forms of classification for the genre of creation myth-- students will use the distinctions that he delineates in order to generate their own essential questions for inquiry and exploration.

While the language and symbols used in creation myths may differ, nature plays a foundational role in most studies, a topic Gleiser attributes to the fact that "[s]ince humans could not control nature, they tried to appease it" (5). This is relevant to modern audiences as "our evolving understanding of natural phenomena changed the way we picture the Universe and our place in it" (Gleiser 21). While their legacies may not be immediately apparent, the study of creation myths can illuminate and interrogate current approaches to environmental stewardship-- a matter of increasing import in an age of global industrialization and consumption.

Learning Plan

1. read excerpts from first chapter (Creation Myths) of *The Dancing Universe: From Creation Myths to the Big Bang*, by Marcelo Gleiser, generate essential questions for the comparative study of origin stories
2. "Building Background Knowledge" workshop: Genesis; introduce literary elements plot and theme
3. read Genesis Chapters 1-3 in class
4. lecture on the differences between Jewish and Christian interpretation of Genesis
5. debrief and revisit essential questions
6. introduce Pecha Kucha format and group project assignment, watch example Pecha Kucha presentations

7. analyze Judeo-Christian origin story by creating a Pecha Kucha as a class
8. in-class reading (Literature Circles) and group work
9. group presentations
10. presentation debriefs, compare common symbolism

Possible Extension Activities/Assignments:

11. analytical essay on comparative symbolism*
12. read “Who Will Greet You at Home” by Lesley Nneka Arimah as an example of a modern myth (British-Nigerian)*
13. debrief, class discussion of modern relevance of values identified in origin stories*
14. transition to 3rd unit “Developing a Critical Lens: Systems of Oppression in America” with in-class reading of “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema” by Horace Miner*
15. panel discussion with local religious leaders: environmental justice in NYC faith communities*

UbD (Understanding by Design) Template

Stage 1: Desired Results

Students will understand that...	Students will discuss...
Students will know...	Students will be able to...
-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - generate and answer essential questions - analyze symbols by interpreting figurative language characteristic to origin stories - identify cultural values and systems of organization - work collaboratively in groups of 2-3 students to present on a cultural original story by following Pecha Kucha format - draw connections between academic subjects during class discussions

Stage 2: Evidence

Evaluative Criteria (CCSS)	Assessment Evidence
<p>1. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.</p> <p>2. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.6 Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.</p> <p>3. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5 Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.</p> <p>4. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.</p> <p>5. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5 Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.</p> <p>6. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6 Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.</p> <p>7. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● reading quizzes (1, 3) ● annotation of Genesis Chapters 1-3 (1-3) ● notes from guest speaker (2, 3) ● group project: Pecha Kucha (1-6) ● Pecha Kucha presentations notes packet (2, 3, 7) <p>*Extensions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● annotation of “Who Will Greet You at Home” by Lesley Nneka Arimah ● analytical essay: comparative symbolism in origin stories (9th grade writing) ● creative writing: modern myths (9th grade writing) ● speaker panel: environmental justice in NYC faith communities notes (spring semester)

For information about the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity, see: www.religiousworldsnyc.org.