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Introduction

From Stone Age culture to the complexities of Elizabethan drama and the elaborate conceits of the Metaphysical poets, this unit introduces students to the beginnings of British literature and culture. *Beowulf*, the great Anglo-Saxon epic, epitomizes values of the culture from which it sprang: bravery, physical strength, loyalty, fame, and acceptance of fate. The work, born in the oral tradition, paints a dualistic picture of good pitted against evil and makes it clear that heroes are not born every day.

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* presents a microcosm of medieval England. The colorful gallery of characters displays a wide range: a knight who is a paragon of chivalry; an earthy and oft-married woman from Bath; clergy, both dedicated and self-serving; a brawling miller who also plays a bagpipe; and a sometime pirate. Society was no longer divided into two extremes, as the middle class had begun to emerge quite distinctly. Chaucer's genius is evident in the way the stories reflect the personalities and motives of the characters telling them.

William Shakespeare, of course, epitomizes the Elizabethan period. The product of the middle class from the country town Stratford-upon-Avon, he became a poet, actor, playwright, and director. His best works sparkle today as they did centuries ago and continue to draw theater and movie directors around the world. In both quantity and quality, few writers could hope to compete with Shakespeare.

The tumultuous seventeenth century saw a monarchy toppled and restored and brought forth the poetry of the Cavaliers and the Metaphysicals, as well as John Milton's magnum opus *Paradise Lost* and John Bunyan's allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

A study of British literature is in some ways like a cruise through time. You and your students will be able to enjoy the various port stops along the way and appreciate how works penned long ago still connect with life today.

What Is an Epic?

Directions: Read the description of an epic, and complete the exercise to show how *Beowulf* makes use of traditional epic devices.

An epic is a narrative, often in poem form, that describes the adventures of a hero. Epics have substantial length, and they are basically serious. Epic heroes reflect the values of their cultures and are involved in serious quests and conflicts; they exhibit humor or lightheartedness only rarely. To tell the story of the hero, an epic needs substantial length, more like a novel than like a short story. Traditional epics were created in poem form.

| Epic Form | What Happens in <i>Beowulf</i> ? |
|--|----------------------------------|
| 1. Narrative: An epic tells a story; it is not an essay. | |
| 2. Substantial length: It is more like a novel than like a short story. | |
| 3. Poetic form: Traditional epics were poetry, not prose. | |
| 4. Heroic protagonist: The main character is good and bigger than life. | |
| 5. Series of adventures and triumphs: The protagonist experiences dangers and challenges. | |
| 6. Cultural values: The protagonist is a role model of everything seen as good in the culture. | |

Planning the Great American Epic

Directions: Modern American culture is not the product of an ancient storytelling tradition, and so there is no national epic, although some people see Huckleberry Finn as an epic hero and others give that role to Superman. Create a plan for this long-missing national epic.

1. Where and when will your story occur? What events will it feature?
2. How long do you want it to be? How many chapters will it include?
3. Will you use poetic form? Has prose today for the most part replaced poetic expression and thus become acceptable in an epic? Or does verse have an effect on the way we perceive the importance of a story?
4. Give your protagonist a name, and describe him/her.
5. List a series of adventures to be included in your epic.
6. What American values will your protagonist embody?

The Effects of Translations

Directions: Translators make choices regarding both diction and syntax. They have to think about words' denotations and connotations, as well as about sentence structures. They also have to be familiar with both the original language and the one into which they are translating. Read the following translations of a single line from *Beowulf*, and answer the questions.

"He went there to visit at the fall of night."
—Edwin Morgan

"Then at the nightfall the fiend drew near."
—Charles W. Kennedy

"When night descended, Grendel set out."
—Stanley B. Greenfield

"When the sun was sunken, he set out to visit."
—Lesslie Hall

"Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel. . ."
—Burton Raffel

"Went he forth to find at fall of night. . ."
—Francis B. Gummere

1. What do the translations have in common? What do they all indicate about the original?

2. What does this single line show about Grendel?

3. How do the translators' interpretations differ?

What Is a Sonnet?

Part A

Directions: Carefully read the information, and highlight the main points.

The type of poem we call a sonnet originated with an Italian poet named Petrarch who wrote numerous short poems in honor of a woman named Laura. The word *sonnet* comes from an Italian word meaning “little song.” The form spread from Italy through France and Spain and into England, where it was eventually modified slightly to produce the English or Shakespearean sonnet. When you read a sonnet by Shakespeare or other English sonneteers, look for the following characteristics:

- A sonnet must have fourteen lines. It can be neither shorter nor longer than that.
- Each line has ten syllables consisting of five iambs. An *iamb* (or *iambic foot*) consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. The following words exemplify the iamb: *around, abstain, debate, believe*. (In contrast, the following words are not iambic: *system, bother, mountain, jewel*.)
- The contents of the sonnet divide neatly into three quatrains and a concluding couplet.
- The lines have a pattern of end rhymes. The rhyming pattern in the quatrains is *abab*.

Part B

Directions: Read Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73 and answer the questions.

Sonnet 73

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

In me thou see’st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death’s second self, that seals up all in rest.

In me thou see’st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed, whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourish’d by.

This thou perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

—William Shakespeare

1. Throughout the poem, what does the speaker emphasize about himself?
2. Verify the specifics of the sonnet form. Does this poem match the criteria?
3. To what does the speaker compare himself in the first quatrain?
4. How does the metaphor change in the second quatrain?
5. What is the comparison in the third quatrain?
6. How does the poem close? Is the ending optimistic or pessimistic?

How to Read an Essay

Directions: An essay is a prose composition in which a writer discusses a subject with a particular end in mind. Several types of essays, along with strategies for reading them, are listed below. In approaching an essay, you should first read it for your own understanding and pleasure, then reread it to apply the appropriate strategies for the type of essay you are reading. Be aware that many essays combine types.

Persuasion/Argumentation

Read analytically. Identify the author's thesis (the point he is arguing for), and examine how he has arranged the argument. Consider each component of the argument, particularly analogies and assertions, for accuracy and relevance. Recognize assumptions required by these assertions or analogies. Are you willing to grant these assumptions? Consider the personality of the essayist (often suggested by tone) and the role the writer invites you to play. How does your perception of the essayist's personality affect your responses to the essay's ideas? Formulate your responses to the view presented.

Narration

Pay attention to the events of the narratives. Try to divide the narrative into meaningful parts, and consider the way description, dialogue, and commentary contribute to the events being narrated. Look for passages of special thematic importance in which the author steps back from narration to comment on something's significance or to offer an interpretation. Consider the persuasive force of the narrative in supporting the author's ideas. Consider the implied personality of the essayist in both the narrative sections and the interpretive parts. How does the narrative affect your responses to the essay as a whole? Finally, ask yourself if you find the essay convincing.

Meditation/Reflection

Pay especially close attention to the associations made with words, images, and ideas. Consider how one detail suggests another, and explore the process that leads the author from one detail or idea to the next. This sort of examination, which we often think is appropriate for poetry, is applicable to the meditative essay as well. Note tone and imagery. Only after you have made an investigation of this kind should you begin to ask questions about any persuasive dimensions of the essay.

Dramatic Elements

Concentrate on the dramatic elements of the essay—character, setting, and plot. Consider whether any one character seems to speak with the writer's authority. If you feel this to be the case, investigate details to determine whether the evidence for this is sufficient. The descriptions of scenes and settings can also voice the author's feelings on a subject. Finally, look for dramatic movement toward a climax. Determine the relationship between dramatic form and persuasive purpose.

Persona/Point of View

Pay close attention to the character of the speaker. Determine how your impression of the speaker's character is influenced by style. Consider how the speaker's ideas shape your impressions. Once you have established the speaker's character and ideas, figure out what you believe to be the author's opinions. The author's ideas may be directly stated in the essay itself, but you may also have to deduce them on your own.