

Exploring Themes in Literature

Universal Themes in the Oral Tradition

Written literature grew out of the **oral tradition**, the passing of stories, poems, and sayings by word of mouth. Around campfires and at other gatherings, people told tales about love, ambition, and friendship. Expressing their human concerns in stories, they explored **universal themes**, insights into life that are true for many different times and cultures. The following are examples of common universal themes:

- the importance of heroism
- the strength of loyalty
- the power of love
- the dangers of greed

Storytellers explored such themes by means of **archetypes**, the situations, characters, images, and symbols that appear in the tales of various cultures. Here are some important archetypes:

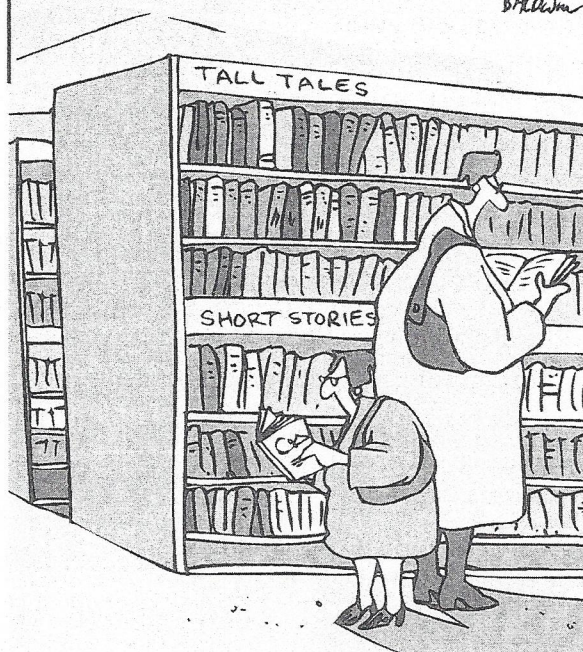
- the **hero's quest**, in which a brave or clever person undergoes tests or trials while searching for something of great value
- the struggle between the **protagonist**, the main character, and the **antagonist**, a person or force that opposes the protagonist
- the **monster**, a nonhuman or semi-human creature that menaces human society and must be destroyed by the hero
- the **trickster**, a clever character who can fool others but often gets into trouble through curiosity
- the **circle** as a symbol of loyalty, completion, or protection

The **historical context** is the social and cultural background of a particular tale. This context influences the presentation of archetypes. Yet, even with cultural variations, one can recognize archetypes across time and culture.

Cornered

by Mike Baldwin

10-16 © 2004 Mike Baldwin / Dist. by Universal Press Syndicate www.cornered.com
cornered@comlc.com



CORNERED © 2004, Mike Baldwin. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE.
All rights reserved.

Forms That Express Universal Themes

Anonymous storytellers developed various forms to express universal themes and archetypes. At first, these forms lived only in the memory, and a tale might vary with every telling. Later in history, stories were written down and individual authors emerged.

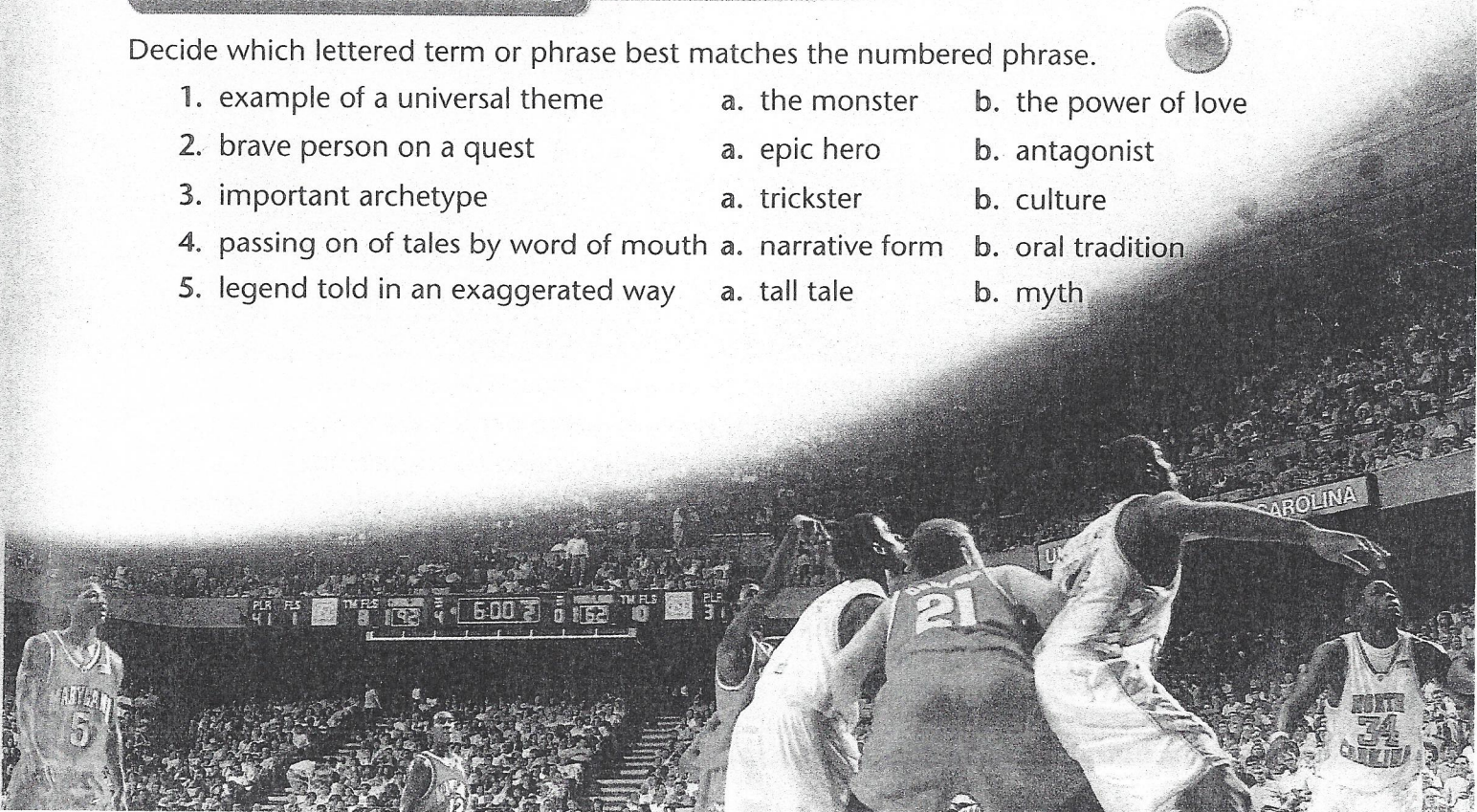
- **Myths** explain the actions of gods and the humans who interact with them. Myths also explain the causes of natural phenomena.
- **Folk tales** focus on human or animal heroes and, unlike myths, are not primarily concerned with gods or creation.
- **Legends** are folk tales that recount the adventures of a human hero and are based on a historical truth. A legend told in an exaggerated way is a **tall tale**.
- **Epics** are long narrative poems that describe the exploits of larger-than-life heroes. The hero usually engages in a dangerous journey or quest that is important to the history of a group or culture.

All of these narrative forms express the **values**, ideals, and behaviors cherished by a society. **Shared values** are held in common by people across cultures. In contrast, **culturally distinct values** are specific to a group. In a literary work, **cultural details** are the beliefs, traditions, and customs that reflect a particular society. Modern literature, though written by individuals rather than fashioned by a group, can also express universal themes.

Check Your Understanding

Decide which lettered term or phrase best matches the numbered phrase.

- | | | |
|---|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1. example of a universal theme | a. the monster | b. the power of love |
| 2. brave person on a quest | a. epic hero | b. antagonist |
| 3. important archetype | a. trickster | b. culture |
| 4. passing on of tales by word of mouth | a. narrative form | b. oral tradition |
| 5. legend told in an exaggerated way | a. tall tale | b. myth |



Build Skills from the *Odyssey*, Part 1

Practice these skills with the excerpt from the *Odyssey*, Part 1.



Standard Course
of Study

- Use preparation, engagement, and reflection appropriate to critique text. (CT.4.02.1)
- Produce responses that follow the conventions of a specific genre. (LT.5.01.11)

Literary Analysis

An **epic hero** is the larger-than-life central character in an **epic**—a long narrative poem about important events in the history or folklore of a nation or culture. Through adventurous deeds, the epic hero demonstrates traits that are valued by the society in which the epic originates. Here, Odysseus shows his courage and leadership:

Now, by the gods, I drove my big hand spike
deep in the embers, charring it again,
and cheered my men along with battle talk
to keep their courage up; no quitting now.

Many epics begin *in medias res* (“in the middle of things”), meaning that much of the important action in the story occurred before the point at which the poem begins. Therefore, the epic hero’s adventures are often recounted in a **flashback**, a scene that interrupts the sequence of events in a narrative to relate earlier events.

Reading Skill

The **historical and cultural context** of a work is the backdrop of details of the time and place in which the work is set or in which it was written. These details include specific events, beliefs, and customs. When you read a work from another time and culture, use **background and prior knowledge** to analyze the influence of the historical and cultural context.

- Read the author biography, footnotes, and other text aids.
- Note how characters’ behavior and attitudes reflect the context.

As you read, use a chart like the one shown to note the influence of ancient Greek culture in Homer’s *Odyssey*.

Vocabulary Builder

- **plundered** (plun’ dər) v. took goods by force; looted (p. 951) *The fierce pirates captured the merchant ship and plundered it.*
- **dispatched** (di spacht’) v. finished quickly (p. 960) *Remarkably, she dispatched this assignment a full hour before anyone else did.*
- **mammoth** (mam’ əth) adj. enormous (p. 963) *The mammoth ship made all others in the harbor look tiny.*
- **assuage** (ə swāj’) v. calm; pacify (p. 971) *Gentle words may assuage their anger.*
- **bereft** (bē reft’) adj. deprived (p. 973) *Bereft of sleep, she struggled to stay awake in class.*
- **ardor** (ər’ dər) n. passion; enthusiasm (p. 978) *The audience cheered with ardor.*
- **insidious** (in sid’ ē əs) adj. characterized by craftiness and betrayal (p. 981) *The traitor’s insidious actions led to the city’s downfall.*

Historical / Cultural Detail

“Now Zeus the lord of cloud roused in the north a storm against the ships. . . .”



Background

Zeus is king of the gods in Greek mythology.



Analysis

The *Odyssey* reflects a belief that the gods participate actively in the lives of mortals.

Background

The Trojan War The *Odyssey* describes the experiences of the Greek hero Odysseus as he makes his way home after the Trojan War. According to legend, the Trojan War was sparked when Paris ran off with Helen. A Greek force attacked Troy (in modern-day Turkey) to recapture her and was finally victorious after ten years of fighting.

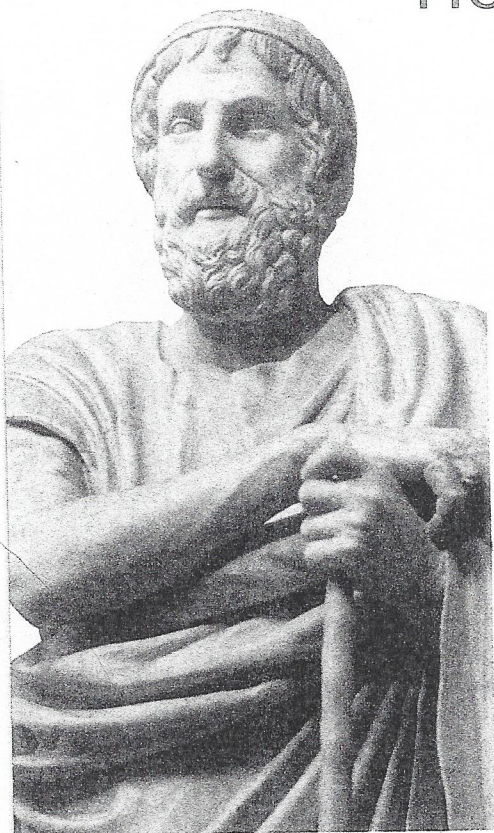
Connecting to the Literature

Reading/Writing Connection In the *Odyssey*, Homer describes a journey filled with amazing adventures. Write a paragraph that tells of a journey you have taken or imagined. Describe something challenging or amazing that occurred. Use at least three of these words: *coincide, eliminate, encounter, highlight, interact.*

READ MORE

by Homer
Iliad

Meet the Author



Homer (ca. 800 B.C.)

Homer is the legendary poet credited with writing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Their length and scope, gripping stories, imagery, and style have captured readers' imaginations for almost 3,000 years.

Did Homer Exist? Scholars disagree about whether the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were really written by Homer. According to tradition, Homer was born in western Asia Minor and was blind. However, many scholars feel confident that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are the result of generations of oral poetic composition, masterpieces to which numerous ancient singers contributed. If Homer existed, he may have been the greatest in a long line of Greek epic storytellers.

Fast Facts

- ▶ The adjective *Homeric* means "large-scale; massive; epic in scope."
- ▶ Homer's stories have been the basis for many Hollywood movies, including *Troy* in 2004.

Go Online
Author Link

For: More information about the author

Visit: www.PHSchool.com

Web Code: epe-9602