



Interpreting Figurative Language in the *Odyssey* Grades Nine and Ten

Skill Focus

Levels of Thinking		
Remember	Understand	Apply
Analyze		
Close Reading	Grammar	Composition
Reading Strategies Determining Author's Purpose Determining Main Idea Inference Paraphrase Summary Literary Elements Diction connotation denotation vocabulary Figures of Speech Metaphor extended/controlling Simile epic (Homeric simile)	Usage Pronoun/Antecedent Agreement	

Materials and Resources

- The *Odyssey* by Homer, translation by Robert Fitzgerald

Lesson Introduction

Maintaining the link between language and meaning can be difficult for teachers and students alike. The temptation to *identify* figurative language and connotative diction, rather than to *interpret* it, is always present in the classroom. Activities such as the ones that follow can serve to remind both students and teachers that the *identification* of literary devices and techniques is useless if a deeper *understanding* of the text's meaning does not result from a close examination of the author's language.

A preliminary review of the various types of comparisons and their functions may assist students in their analysis of these quotations from the *Odyssey*. Similarly, teachers may need to review with their students the ways in which diction can influence tone. Students need only a little background information before practicing the concepts they have learned. The actual analysis of texts is the best kind of practice they can receive in order to develop this skill.

Close Reading



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Activity One: Interpreting Comparisons

Identify the type of figurative language in the quotes below. Fill in the blanks to identify the comparison and discuss the effect or purpose of the use of the device.

A man surfcasting on a point of rock
for bass or mackerel, whipping his long rod
to drop the sinker and the bait far out,
will hook a fish and rip it from the surface
to dangle wriggling through the air:
 so these [men]
were borne aloft in spasms toward the cliff (218).

1. Type of figurative language _____
The author is comparing _____
to the way Odysseus' men were _____.

The comparison gives the impression that _____
because _____.

 And Odysseus
let the bright molten tears run down his cheeks,
weeping the way a wife mourns for her lord
on the lost field where he has gone down fighting
the day of wrath that came upon his children.
As sight of the man panting and dying there,
she slips down to enfold him, crying out;
then feels the spears, prodding her back and shoulders,
and goes bound into slavery and grief.
Piteous weeping wears away her cheeks;
but no more piteous than Odysseus' tears,
cloaked as they were, now, from the company (141).



2. Type of figurative language _____
 The author is comparing Odysseus' _____
 to _____.

This comparison illustrates Odysseus' _____
 because _____.

Now from his breast into his eyes the ache
 of longing mounted, and he wept at last,
 his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms,
 longed for _____
 _____ as the sunwarmed earth is longed for by a swimmer
 spent in rough water where his ship went down
 under Poseidon's blows, gale winds and tons of sea.
 Few men can keep alive through a big surf
 to crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches
 in joy, in joy, knowing the abyss behind (436);

3. Type of figurative language _____
 The author is comparing the way Odysseus _____
 to the way _____.

This comparison illustrates the _____ of
 Odysseus because _____.

But the man skilled in all ways of contending,
 satisfied by the great bow's look and heft,
 like a musician, like a harper, when
 with quiet hand upon his instrument
 he draws between his thumb and forefinger
 a sweet new string upon a peg; so effortlessly
 Odysseus in one motion strung the bow.
 Then slid his right hand down the cord and plucked it,
 so the taut gut vibrating hummed and sang
 a swallow's note (404).

Close Reading

4. Type of figurative language _____
 The author is comparing Odysseus' _____
 to _____.
- The comparison illustrates Odysseus' _____
 because _____.

Activity Two: Interpreting Diction and Identifying Antecedents

Read the following passages and complete the following activities:

- A. Using context clues, define the underlined words.
- B. Explain or paraphrase the text in brackets.
- C. Identify the antecedents of the words in **bold face** print.

'O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,
 punish Odysseus' men! So overweening
 now, they have killed, my peaceful kine, my joy
 at morning when I climbed the sky of stars,
 and evening, when I bore westward from heaven.
 [Restitution or penalty **they** shall pay –]
 and pay in full – or I go down forever
 to light the dead men in the underworld' (222).

1. A.
- B.
- C.

As we rowed on, and nearer to the mainland,
 at one end of the bay, **we** saw a cavern
 yawning above the water, screened with laurel,
 and many rams and goats about the place
 inside a sheepfold – [made from slabs of stone
earthfast between tall trunks of pine and rugged
 towering oak trees] (150).



2. A.
B.
C. (inference)

And all this time,
in travail, sobbing, gaining on the current,
[we rowed into the strait – Skylla to port
and on our starboard beam Kharybdis], dire
gorge of the salt sea tide. By heaven! when **she**
vomited, all the sea was like a cauldron
seething over intense fire, when the mixture
suddenly heaves and rises (174).

3. A.
B.
C.

‘It is still night,
and no moon. Can we drive now? We can not,
[itch as we may for the road home.] Dawn is near.
Allow the captain of spearmen, Meneláos,
time to pack our car with gifts and time
to speak a gracious word, sending us off.
A gracious guest remembers all **his** days
that host who makes provision for him kindly’ (269).

4. A.
B.
C.

‘Friend, I’ll explain to you
 There is no rancor in the town against me,
 no fault of brothers, whom a man should feel
 behind **him** when a fight is in the making’
 no, no – in our family the First Born
 of Heaven, Zeus, [made single sons the rule]’ (293).

5. A.
 B.
 C.

This hard shot took the women’s breath away
 and drove them quaking to their rooms, as though
 knives were behind; **they** felt he spoke the truth.
 So there he stood and kept the firelight high
 and looked the suitors over, [while his mind
 roamed far ahead to what must be accomplished] (347).

6. A.
 B.
 C.

“O Father Zeus, if over land and water,
 [after adversity, you willed to bring **me** home,]
 let someone in the waking house give me good augury,
 and a sign be shown, too, in the outer world” (378).

7. A.
 B.
 C. (inference)