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

**Skill Focus**

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**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.
Interpreting Figurative Language in the *Odyssey*

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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).
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).
‘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).

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).

“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).