

UNDER A WAR-TORN SKY: **A SAMPLE LESSON PLAN FOR TEACHERS OF GRADES 7-10**

Encounters with “Coming of Age” and the Archetypal Hero: Making the connection with L. M. Elliott’s historical fiction “Under a War-torn Sky”

This lesson plans describes a pre-reading activity for the L. M. Elliott novel “Under a War-torn Sky” that is appropriate for middle school and high school learners in language arts and social studies classes. Because the novel is a meticulously researched work of historical fiction, the lesson suggests an opportunity for cross-curricular programs seeking to integrate literature study with instruction on armed conflict (World War II).

For students in grades 7 through 8 in English/Language Arts, use as core text (or pair with core texts involving the theme of coming of age and which represent the archetypal hero). For students in Social Studies, pair with textbook and multi-media representations of armed conflict, particularly World War II.

For students grades 9 through 10 in courses of study including English/Language Arts, use as core text or pair with reading of classic epics (such as the Odyssey) involving the archetypal hero and the theme of “coming of age” (incorporating “the journey” and “self-discovery”). For students in Social Studies, as above, pair with texts describing the realities of World War II.

Rationale for using Under a War-torn Sky as a core text or as a paired text.

This award-winning work, which has been read by an estimated 500,000 young readers in the U.S. and abroad, is used as a core or supplemental text in classrooms, and appears on summer reading lists across the United States. The Alan Review identifies this novel and the author’s other historical fictions as exemplary texts for teachers introducing historical fiction to their program of studies. In “Writing and Teaching Historical Fiction: The Lantern of Learning with L.M. Elliott” (*The Alan Review*, Summer, 2009), Ohio University professor Linda Rice writes, “Historical fiction plunges readers into the past in a way that allows them to think, feel, and reason with greater complexity; awareness heightens and understanding deepens.”

The novel accurately describes the challenges faced by Air Force aviators who survived being shot down by Nazi fighters while in combat. In this case, the protagonist – who “comes of age” during this experience – is a 19-year-old bomber pilot who is downed in a Nazi-controlled region of France and survives due to the efforts of Resistance fighters. **Language arts teachers** will appreciate that the journey the protagonist takes as he returns to Allied-controlled France -- and ultimately to his home in Virginia -- resembles the journey incorporated in many mythological heroic tales, including epics such as the Odyssey.

Although it is a work of fiction, the narrative was inspired by the “real-life” experiences of the author’s own father, including his survival when trying to escape behind lines. **Social studies teachers** will value the novel’s historically accurate details relating to air combat and the heroic actions of Resistance fighters and civilians, recreating the actual conditions of life in Nazi-occupied France in 1944.

The Alan Review describes L. M. Elliott as “one of the great authors of historical fiction providing a lantern of learning about history and the connectedness of humankind in times of peace and prosperity, as well as poverty, war, and transition.” Awards and citations include: A Notable Social Studies Book for Young People, 2002, NCSS/CBC (National Council for the Social Studies and the Children’s Book Council); Jefferson Cup Award Honor Book (for historical fiction); finalist for the South Carolina Junior Book Award, Pennsylvania Young Readers’ Choice; Iowa Teen Award; Maryland’ Black-eyed Susan Book Award; “Best

Children's Book of the Year," Bank Street College of Education; and "Best Book about Trauma, Tragedy and Loss," Children's Book Council (CBC).

Teachers in both content areas will appreciate the veracity of the work. Factual information integrated with the narrative is the result of primary research performed by the author in the United States and in France; the author also employed a journalistic process to investigate historical details through secondary research at French Resistance museums, The Library of Congress, and other sources. In addition, the author also refers to dozens of actual artifacts, some of which were her father's own property, to enhance the authenticity of the narrative.

Objective/SWBAT (Literature):

In a unit beginning with this lesson, the learner will be able to: (1) define and discuss the theme of coming of age and (2) recognize and describe the archetypal hero.

Specifically, in this lesson – a pre-reading exercise for Under a War-torn Sky – students will be able to relate their existing conceptualizations of “the journey” and “the heroic protagonist” with those depicted in the novel.

An outcome of reading the novel and future lessons is to prepare the student for study of “coming of age” stories involving “rites of passage” which correspond to “the archetypal hero.” For ninth grade teachers, for instance, the novel can be paired with the *Odyssey*, augmenting their understanding with a more recent and perhaps culturally recognizable hero-figure.

An additional effect of the lesson, to be reinforced in future lessons, will be to help a student appreciate how historical fiction can allow them to engage the imagination while simultaneously enhancing understanding of actual historic events.

Objective/SWBAT (Social Studies):

In a unit beginning with this lesson, students learning about the impact of war on a culture will understand and be able to describe a range of effects, including the physical, social, economic, moral, and emotional challenges faced by military and civilian populations.

Given the specifics of the novel, the student learning about World War II will become acquainted with the actions of Allied military personnel and Resistance forces engaged in combat with Nazi troops in occupied France. Emphasis in this lesson and subsequent lessons in the unit will be on the challenges faced by youth, ranging from American military personnel still in their teens to native children who are swept up into the conflict

Prior Learning

Students do not need to have a concrete understanding of “coming of age,” “rites of passage,” or “the archetypal hero”; the unit initiated by this lesson can be an introduction to all three.

Students in a social studies class will benefit from some advance preparation on the history of World War II in Europe, or, as a minimum, the nature of the Allied military effort and Nazi occupations in Europe during the war.

Materials

- (1) A copy of Under a War-torn Sky for each student, (2) board and markers (3) access to the internet via a computer with television-sized monitor or projection technology.

Lesson Outline for Pre-reading Activity (Plan one “block” period or two “regular” periods)

1. **Re-establish prior knowledge/establish set.** Ask individual students to think about stories involving a “real-life person or fictional character who must go on a journey to face a difficult challenge, knowing that there is a risk or danger involved.” Students to think/pair/share and then form in groups of four to share. Encourage them to think of stories they know or have heard that involve “people doing extraordinary (“awesome”) things involving unusual bravery.” Support with board work: create three columns – “Person/Character”/“Journey From/To”/“Challenge” Use board work to sort student responses into categories. Model an example using a fictional or historic figure familiar to the students from previous reading. (Consider an example with story novelty – one that students may not already know -- such as the Apollo 13 disaster. Use columns to sort information, that is, for Apollo 13, describe astronaut names, journey to moon, explosion of oxygen tanks.)
2. **Relate activity to new learning.** Close activity by commenting on how many stories of this type there are – in the stories they have read, and throughout history. Ask: “Which characters or real people are most inspiring to you personally – those from fact or those from fiction?” Ask students to support their responses.
3. **Introduce Under a War-torn Sky by L.M. Elliott.** Explain that the students are about to read a story about a person who – like those in the examples from the class activity – travels far from home to take on a challenge involving great risk. (Recommended: First, to build interest, ask students to consider a “trick question”: “Can anyone think of an example of a character or person who fits the discussion we are having who is “factual” and fictional” at the same time?”)
4. **Circulate copies of Under a War-torn Sky.** Ask students to review the cover art and notes to speculate about what the story would be about. (“What are the clues about what “factual or fictional” character is involved – and during what historical period?”) Use clues to introduce or refresh the class on basics of World War II history, including time period, nations involved, methods of warfare, the challenges to civilians, and specific terms such as “French Resistance” and “Gestapo.”

Explain that this is a novel of “historical fiction,” that the characters are based on “real-life” people and “real-life” situations. The fictional story takes place against a backdrop of actual places and events.

Extension: Use computer with projection capability to “visit” the author’s website. (Select internal or external links that promote understanding of basic facts prior to reading.)

5. **Read.** Students can read silently or aloud. Recommended: The novel’s opening chapter features a dramatic dream sequence that lends itself to reading aloud; the dream sequence is followed by a scene with several character “parts” for theatrical reading.

Transition to out-of-class assignments

1. Provide a graphic organizer according to teacher’s preference that students will complete while reading the first 10 chapters. **Allow time to practice use of the organizer with in class, using class reading as a model.** Alternative: Have students create a log of details while reading at home, with a focus on the protagonist and the nature of the journey he is on, drawing from information “found” in the text and “suggested” by the text.

Suggestions for Activities for Additional Lessons and Out-of-Class Assignments

Use these activities to create a unit for curriculum objectives including “elements of the novel” (development of setting, character, conflict, theme, tone, etc.), “rites of passage,” “coming of age,” and “the archetypal hero.” Use to promote critical reading skills, including analysis of character, plot, and theme development. Activities promote writing and oral language skills plus the use of context clues to decode new vocabulary.

Use a graphic organizer to help students identify changes in setting (time and place), characters (physical description and internal conflict), conflicts (problems to be solved by protagonist and other characters), and themes (“lessons learned” by protagonist and other characters). Use individual deskwork, pair work, group share among small groups, and independent work outside of class to complete the organizer chapter by chapter.

Write a reader-response log in which the student assumes the role of the protagonist and describes events and responses in the form of a diary, including dates, location, characters, key events, and personal responses.

Create a reader-response notebook in which the reader incorporates text from the novel, personal responses, images of WWII pilots and their aircraft, air warfare, 1944 France, cities, towns, and regional roads traveled by the protagonist, and other images from print and on-line resources available the classroom, media center, or at home.

Produce a wall display of a map depicting the protagonist’s journey from being shot down in France to his eventual return home to Virginia. Small groups can have the responsibility of extracting details from an assigned segment of chapters that describe a phase of the journey.

Perform “storybook theater” presentations in which small groups are responsible for presenting passages or whole chapters. Use independent work and class discussion to identify key “episodes” (involving major conflicts, including responses by the protagonist and other characters which represent “rites of passage” in the context of “coming of age”). Within groups, students self-select roles including a director, narrator, characters, and special effects (for sounds or lighting). Students stage presentations in which all words in the text are read aloud and actions are dramatized.

Employ a variety of media to research topics including “Pilots and combat,” “Civilian Life in France,” “The French Resistance,” “Nazi Occupation” and topics closely related to the novel; expand with “The Year 1944” (including famous personalities, political figures, sports figures, music, fashion, and lifestyle). Students can use the text of the novel as well as the author’s website and related links to expand their awareness of the people, places, and events described. Use group presentation or have students create learning stations to be “visited” by other students. Encourage use of airplane models, maps, costumes, popular songs, foods and other objects.

Write a new scene for the novel in the style of the author. Select plot elements that are referred to but not described in detail by the author in the narrative, or ask students to imagine entirely new scenes.

Promote understanding of vocabulary by assigning one or more new vocabulary words to each student; during the reading, students become a “click-able link” similar to those found in on-line texts. Using a “clicker”, students interrupt reading to define the word for the class. All students keep track of vocabulary meanings on a vocabulary worksheet.

Practice use of context clues to decode difficult vocabulary by assigning passages including French words, phrases, and sentences. Students can work in pairs to formulate “translations.” Students with skills in French can be consulted as experts to help construct correct meanings; teachers should be prepared with a translation worksheet to verify results.