Grade 7 Playlist: Interpreting Allusions in Context

Aligns with CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.7.5.A:

- Interpret figures of speech (e.g., literary, biblical, and mythological allusions) in context.

Welcome

When reading old or modern texts, readers often come across familiar references. For example, a greedy person might be called a "Scrooge." Someone who is good at solving mysteries may be referred to as a "regular Sherlock Holmes." If a mistake is made that leads to not just one problem but a chain of negative events, someone may say, "Pandora's box has been opened!" Readers may know that Scrooge, Sherlock Holmes, and Pandora are characters from works of literature and mythology. Knowledge of the references' sources adds meaning to the text. However, even without recognizing the reference, readers could interpret the expressions' meaning by examining the context.

Watch!

Watch this video for a brief overview of these expressions:

- https://www.opened.com/video/literary-device-allusion-youtube/99757

Objectives

In this playlist, students will learn how to:

- interpret literary allusions in context.

Review

Key Terms

- An **allusion** is an expression that makes a reference to a previous work without mentioning it specifically. Allusions can reference people, places, things, or ideas that are culturally, politically, or historically significant.

- The **context** identifies the words, phrases, and ideas that surround the allusion.

Exploring the Standard

Allusions from literary, biblical, and mythological sources are often used in literature. Some readers can immediately identify the allusions based on their prior knowledge. Not all allusions are familiar, however. When the allusions are unfamiliar, a reader can interpret their meanings by analyzing allusions in context, even without fully understanding the stories behind them.

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Watch!

Watch this video to learn more about allusions in literature:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJ9vHo-HCVY

A Closer Look: Why Use Allusions?

An author might want to use allusions to other works of literature in their writing for many reasons. One reason is that allusions can give a literary work deeper meaning. Read the following example.

Example 1

Tommy and Sarah were the Romeo and Juliet of Appleseed Drive.

This sentence contains an allusion to the characters Romeo and Juliet from Shakespeare's well-known play *Romeo and Juliet*. Because Tommy and Sarah are compared to the characters in Shakespeare's drama, readers would know immediately that Sarah and Tommy's story would parallel the story of Romeo and Juliet—that is, Sarah and Tommy may like each other and want to date, but their parents likely do not get along. This allusion adds deeper meaning to the sentence and to the story of Tommy and Sarah.

Another reason why an author might use an allusion is to add meaning with a minimal number of words. Read the following examples. One contains an allusion, and one does not.

Example 2

Cleaning the garage was a Herculean task.
Cleaning the garage seemed nearly impossible, and I was certain it would take all day, if it could be finished at all.

The first sentence contains an allusion to Hercules, a hero from Greek mythology known for his great strength and intelligence. In one of the myths involving Hercules, the great hero was ordered to perform a series of extremely difficult tasks, called the Twelve Labors of Hercules. One labor included slaying a lion that could not be killed with human weapons; another involved kidnapping a three-headed dog called Cerberus. Hercules completed each of these tasks without fail, using both his intelligence and his strength. By comparing cleaning the garage to a Herculean task, the author can quickly communicate the difficulty of the task without using too many words. The second sentence has a similar meaning but relies on more words to express the same idea.

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A Closer Look: Examples of Allusions

Some authors use allusions more often than others. The following table uses examples to demonstrate and define two common literary allusions.

Sarita was a hopeless romantic; she believed the *quixotic* love stories that always ended happily.	
quixotic	In the novel *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, Don Quixote is a somewhat confused Spanish nobleman who reads too many books and decides to leave his life behind to become a knight. Because of his impractical and romantic gestures, his name became synonymous with being idealist and unrealistic.
The school's janitor seemed to be like *Jekyll and Hyde*; none of the students knew whether he would be smiling or scowling.	
Jekyll and Hyde	In the story *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, the mild-mannered Dr. Jekyll is plagued by his alternate personality, the evil Mr. Hyde.

The following are two common allusions that reference characters and stories from the Bible.

Eloise has the *patience of Job*; she could wait for hours at the doctor's office without getting grumpy.	
patience of Job	In the Old Testament, Job was a wealthy and prosperous man. He remained faithful and optimistic even after losing his family, his physical health, and all of his possessions.
After traveling the world, the *prodigal son* returned home to surprise his ailing grandfather.	
prodigal son	In the New Testament, Jesus told his followers a parable, or story, about a son who left his family's home, wasted his inheritance, and eventually returned to his father. His father happily accepted him back.

The following table describes two well-known allusions from ancient myths and legends.

James has many strengths, but his arrogance is his *Achilles' heel*.	
Achilles' heel	In Greek mythology, Achilles was a great warrior. His mother dipped him in the River Styx as a baby to make him unable to be wounded. The bath in the river protected Achilles' entire body except for his heel, which is what his mother held as she lowered him into the water. In the Trojan War, an arrow to the heel killed him.
"Don't talk to Hassan about yesterday's test," Calvin said. "You'll open *Pandora's box*, and we'll hear all of his complaints."	
Pandora's box	In Greek mythology, Pandora was the first mortal woman. The god Zeus gave her a box that contained all human troubles, telling her not to open it. Pandora's curiosity drove her to open the box, bringing many problems into the world.

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Watch!

Learn more about different types of allusions by watching these videos:

- https://www.opened.com/video/greek-roman-mythology-allusions-youtube/99759
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpZjmPah-98

A Closer Look: Interpreting Allusions in Context

Although every allusion has a story behind it, knowing an allusion's origin is not necessary to understand its meaning. Read the examples in the following table.

After recovering from her injury, Gina rose like a phoenix from the ashes at her first basketball game.	
Meaning in Context	Even if readers are not familiar with the Egyptian myth of the phoenix, the context can lead them to understand that although Gina's injury kept her from playing basketball, after she recovered, she played as well as she ever had. Therefore, to rise "like a phoenix from the ashes" would mean to suffer a setback and to then return triumphantly.
Meaning in Mythology	In Egyptian mythology, the phoenix was an immortal bird that lived in the deserts of Arabia. At the end of its life, the phoenix would set itself on fire, then rise again from the ashes to begin its next life.
As the school debate tournament began, Demetrius shared the stage with his opponent, Ursula, and felt like David getting ready to fight Goliath.	
Meaning in Context	Demetrius finds the school debate tournament to be intimidating, and he fears that he is facing great competition. The context can lead readers to the understanding that David faced an intimidating opponent named Goliath. Demetrius' opponent, Ursula, is his scary foe.
Meaning in Literature	In the Old Testament, Goliath, an undefeated Philistine warrior who was more than nine feet tall, was challenged by David, a Hebrew shepherd boy and future king. David killed the giant with only a slingshot and a smooth stone.
On his first day of middle school, Trevor stood like a Lilliputian in the crowd of giant eighth-graders.	
Meaning in Context	From this sentence, the reader can infer that because it is his first day of middle school, Trevor is younger than the other students in the crowd. The word *giant* is another clue that he is shorter than they are. Therefore, a "Lilliputian" is a very short person.
Meaning in Literature	In the novel *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, Gulliver visits many lands, including Lilliput, where the people are very tiny.

Practice!

Practice interpreting allusions in context by answering 15 questions in the following quiz:

- https://www.ixl.com/ela/grade-7/interpret-the-meaning-of-allusions

Applying the Standard

Choose one of the literary allusions discussed in this mini-playlist. Write a paragraph with an introductory sentence that uses the allusion. Then, construct a paragraph that supplies the context to help readers interpret the allusion correctly.

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Self-Check: L.7.5.A

1. Read this stanza from the poem "At the Window" by poet D.H. Lawrence:

   "The pine-trees bend to listen to the autumn wind as it mutters
   Something which sets the black poplars [shaking] with hysterical laughter;
   While slowly the house of day is closing its eastern shutters."

   In which of the following ways does the poet use figurative language in the stanza?

   A. He uses simile to compare the trees to something else.
   B. He uses allusion to compare the trees to a famous painting.
   C. He uses hyperbole to make the trees seem more important.
   D. He uses personification to describe the trees' actions.

2. Read the following sentence:

   He lied so much that by the end of the day his nose looked like Pinocchio's.

   Which of the following is the literary allusion made in this sentence?

   A. Pinocchio's nose grew whenever he told a lie.
   B. Pinocchio was a character who lied all the time.
   C. Pinocchio's lies grew larger and larger over time.
   D. Pinocchio was a character who had a very large nose.

3. Read the following sentence:

   Making sure that everyone was awake, dressed, fed, and out the door on time for school was a herculean effort each morning.

   Which of the following is the mythological allusion made in this sentence?

   A. Hercules mainly worked in the mornings.
   B. Hercules was strong and put in a lot of effort.
   C. Hercules organized and cared for many children.
   D. Hercules mainly tended to the household chores.

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4. Read the sentence.

She was like Jekyll and Hyde; one minute she was sweet as could be, and the next minute she was critical of everything you were doing.

Which statements **best** describe the sentence? Select the **two** correct answers.

A. The sentence contains a literary allusion.
B. The sentence contains a biblical allusion.
C. The sentence contains a mythological allusion.
D. The sentence refers to a character who had a split personality with good and evil sides.
E. The sentence refers to two different Greek gods.

5. Read the sentence.

He's a great basketball player, but shooting free throws continues to be his Achilles heel.

Which statements **best** explain the underlined words? Select the **two** correct answers.

A. Achilles was a character in Greek mythology.
B. Achilles was a biblical figure.
C. An Achilles heel is an area of vulnerability.
D. An Achilles heel is an area of strength.
E. An Achilles heel is a body part used specifically in athletic activities.

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