

Alison Saar, *Ulysses*, 1994
Mythology Lesson #3

Mythology Lesson Plan #3 Overview

Main Ideas: Comparative mythology, comparing ancient Greek stories about conflict or the hero's story, to stories of about slavery in America.

Grade Level: 9th Grade

Subject Areas: English Language Arts, Greek Mythology, American History, Visual Arts

Learning Objective: Students will deconstruct and analyze the woodcut print, titled *Ulysses*, by the African American artist Alison Saar. They will examine the work through two different interpretations; one as a direct reading of the Story of Ulysses and the Sirens from the *Odyssey* and the other as a statement about the conflicts faced by slaves.

Duration: 30 -45 minutes

Set up:

- Project Image
- Print (or display) and hand out the Activity Summary
- Print out Graphic Organizer for note taking.

Attachments:

- Lesson #3 Overview
- Activity Instructions
- Graphic Organizer

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Activity Instructions:

1. Read the following two paragraphs about the Ulysses' story and the Object and Artist Introduction below.
2. View the image while completing the Graphic Organizer to follow visual clues listed.
3. In column A, examine each visual clue listed and make notes that explain how each clue does or does not illustrate a part of the story about Ulysses and the Sirens.
4. Next, reinterpret column A as illustrating the idea of slavery, make notes in column C.
5. When done, debate as a group, which conflict seems to be best illustrated in the picture.

Summarized story of Ulysses and the Sirens from *The Odyssey*:

In the twelfth book of the *Odyssey*, as Odysseus (Ulysses) is leaving Kirkê's island, the oracle, Kirkê (Circe) informs Odysseus of the dangers of the sea that he will encounter on his way home, specifically warning him of the Sirens. Sirens are creatures of the sea, who sing songs that hypnotize or lure and trick men into shipwrecking their boats on rocky shores because they follow the irresistible songs. Odysseus instructs his crew to tie him to the mast, telling them to ignore whatever he may say while under the sway of the Siren's song. The sailors stuff their ears with beeswax and then tie Odysseus tightly to the mast. Odysseus is the only one who hears the siren song, while the others ears are covered and they prevent Odysseus from following the song.

Object and Artist Introduction:

Alison Saar wants her art to tell stories but leaves much of the story's interpretation up to the viewer. Her work examines spiritual, political and gender conflicts experienced by women and African Americans throughout history. Saar draws inspiration from characters in literature expanding beyond their original story encouraging viewers to address multiple interpretations. An example of this is a series of sculptures depicting the character Topsy from, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852. (<https://hyperallergic.com/440597/i-wanted-to-make-art-that-told-a-story-alison-saar-on-her-eloquent-sculptures/>)

The title of this print is *Ulysses*. A story where ropes bind Ulysses, is the story of the Sirens in the twelfth book of the *Odyssey* and is one of the many conflicts Ulysses experienced on his long journey home. In this work, we do not know if she is making a direct connection to this story or referencing African American experiences about slavery, or servitude, a common theme in Saar's work. Saar leaves this interpretation up to the viewer.

A	B	C
<p>Alison Saar's Ulysses: Visual Clues and Close looking Questions</p>	<p>How does each visual clue in column A applies to the story: Ulysses (Odysseus) and the Sirens? How is it different?</p>	<p>How does each clue in column A illustrate experiences of African American Slaves? How is it different?</p>
<p>A figure, bound at the feet. Is the figure hanging upside down or lying flat on a surface? How do you know?</p>		
<p>Two floating heads, no bodies, black mask like faces; mouths open, their eyes have no pupils. To whom are they talking?</p>		
<p>The full-length figure's eyes have no pupils.</p>		
<p>Figure's arms and hands are by their side, not bound. Are they holding them there intentionally? Is this a passive or aggressive position?</p>		
<p>Yellow skin, red lips, black clothing, shaved head Does this person look like a hero? Who is this person?</p>		
<p>Skin seems wrinkled or appears to droop or sag. Why would someone's skin sag like this?</p>		
<p>Dark Red background. What does the color red represent?</p>		