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Whitman Hanson Regional School District

THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE U.S. CONSTITUTION  
Final Project – Unit Lesson Plan  
*Plutarch's Lives*

**Historical Background:**

“It was for the sake of others that I first commenced writing biographies; but I find myself proceeding and attaching myself to it for my own; the virtues of these great men serving me as a sort of looking-glass, in which I may see how to adjust and adorn my own life. Indeed, it can be compared to nothing but daily living and associating together; we receive, as it were, in our inquiry, and entertain each successive guest, view ‘their stature and their qualities,’ and select from their actions all that is noblest and worthiest to know. ‘Ah, and what greater pleasure can one have?’, or what more effective means to one’s moral improvement?” (pp.325) Plutarch was a historian but his purpose was morality. In his book, *Plutarch's Lives*, he described the lives of many prominent Greek and Roman men. These men, at the time of Plutarch, and today, left an impression on western civilizations that helped to mold the character and psyche of generations of students. Students that read the legends and stories in Plutarch’s book take part in a practice that, according to Joseph Campbell, help an individual to experience life, and the lives of others. (pp.5)

The first two Lives that Plutarch wrote about were that of Theseus and Romulus. These legendary characters of Greece and Rome provide a necessary founding myth for

the two civilizations that Plutarch was compelled to write about. Next in the book, are the ancient men of Athens (Solon), Sparta (Lycurgus) and Rome (Numa Pompilius) that structured the constitutions, laws, and customs of each of those societies. These *Lives* have a mythical sense to them that Plutarch refers to as the nature of such history: “There is so much uncertainty in the accounts which historians have left us.” (pp.52) But myth and fiction play important roles in our lives. Joseph Campbell, the author of *The Power of Myth*, suggests that two of the major functions of mythology is to support and validate a certain social order as well a “pedagogical function, of how to live a human lifetime.” (pp.39) Theseus and the Minotaur, although myth, teach us the values and norms of the ancient Greeks, but they also teach us about the universal themes and principles that transcend time and cultures. Plutarch understood these principles and used them in the presentation of his biographies. He chose to pair together Greek and Roman men that reflected attributes of each other. These parallel *Lives* continue from the founding of the Greek and Roman civilizations to the transformation of the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire.

Each biography begins at the time of the individual’s birth and ends with his death. Times, dates, and significant actions of common knowledge were recorded and described but “his interest is less for politics and the changes of empires, and more for personal character and individual actions and motives to action; duty performed and rewarded; arrogance chastised, hasty anger corrected; humanity, fair dealing, and generosity triumphing in the visible, or relying on the invisible world. His mind in his biographic memoirs is continually running in the Aristotelian Ethics and the high Platonic theories, which formed the religion of the educated population of his time.” (pp. xxviii)

Plutarch's Lives follow familiar patterns and themes: Temperament and genealogy, compromise and authority, rise of power and "crossing the Rubicon", monuments and triumphs, military conquest and litigation, sacrifice and the divine, major adversaries and allies, pride and avarice, wealth and austerity, honor in old age and the manner in which they died... and their fame and glory in posterity. This structure and pattern can be used to trace and evaluate prominent men during the study of World History, Western Civilization, American History, and contemporary studies. In addition, students can also use Plutarch's biographical model and understanding of the human condition to create their own archetypal myth. This type of artistic expression can serve as a "looking glass" for educators to "to adjust and adorn" the character and lives of their students.

Plutarch's Lives / the Dryden translation, edited with notes and preface by Arthur Hugh Clough. New York: Random House Inc., 2001

Campbell, Joseph with Moyers, Bill. The Power of Myth. New York: Anchor Books a division of Random House Inc., 1991

**Summary (Including objectives and assessment):**

The students will cooperatively read the first five biographies in *Plutarch's Lives*. The class will highlight the reading in their journals on a daily basis. In addition, a formal document will be distributed to each student labeling the archetypal themes and patterns of each biography (see attached, Archetypal Biographical Template). Each student will be expected to complete the template for each of the five biographies. The instructor will

collect these documents and the journals on a daily basis in order to check for accuracy and understanding.

At the completion of the five biographies, the students will choose a prominent historical figure from a predetermined list of American Founding Fathers: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton. The students will be expected to independently research the Founder of their choice in order to accurately complete the archetypal template. The text will have the same template as the document used for the ancient Greek and Romans. Joseph Campbell suggests that “the human psyche is essentially the same all over the world.” (pp.60) This aspect of the assignment will expose the students to Campbell’s understanding of the human psyche. By drawing a parallel between the Greek and the Romans first, then, connecting those men to the Founding Americans, we’ll hope to reveal their common traits and desires... and ultimately the common traits and desires of all men.

The conclusion of this endeavor will require one more parallel to be drawn. Students must compose a mythical character of their own. To do so, the students will be expected to complete the archetypal template for their own mythical hero in order to provide a foundation for their culminating project. In order to successfully complete this project, the students will be expected to create and present orally an adventure for their mythical hero that incorporates the characteristics used in the archetypal template. They will be given ample time to produce a rough draft and practice telling the hero’s journey to their peers. The final assessment of this project will come when the students formally present their myth and submit a final written draft to the instructor for evaluation.

## **Procedure**

In order to prepare for this unit the instructor should read *Plutarch's Lives* in its entirety, *The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell, *Genesis* by Bernard Beckett, and the article *Dehumanized (When math and science rule the school)* by Mark Slouka, that was published in the September 2009 issue of Harper's magazine. After reading Plutarch, the instructor will gain a comprehensive historical background and understanding of his insights and philosophy after reading all of his biographies. In addition, the instructor will also better his or her understanding of the rhythm and pattern of the archetypal template that Plutarch uses to present his biographies. *The Power of Myth* is relevant because it provides an appropriate understanding for the nature of mythology and the meaningful role that it plays for our students. Joseph Campbell also wrote about the founding of the United States and the symbols and myths that were created in order for us to celebrate and revere that event appropriately. *Genesis* is a philosophical science fiction novel that tells the story about an idealistic society that forms after an apocalypse. Greek and Roman concepts are intertwined into the theme of the novel. The story also clearly represents the purpose of a founding myth and a mythical hero. In many ways, this book was the inspiration of this project and it could be given to students to demonstrate the pinnacle of their objectives. Lastly, the *Dehumanized* article gives the instructor a purpose and rationale for the need of humanities in the educational routine for children. Mark Slouka writes: "I believe that what rules us is less the material world of goods and services than the immaterial one of whims, assumptions, delusions, and lies; that only by studying this world can we hope to shape how it shapes us; that only by

attempting to understand what used to be called, in a less embarrassed age, “the human condition” can we hope to make our condition more human, not less.”

Beckett, Bernard. Genesis. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009

Slouka, Mark. *Dehumanized*. Published in Harper’s Magazine, September 2009 (pp. 32-40)

### **Content Standard Alignment:**

#### English Language Arts

- The Reading and Literature Strand
  - o General Standard 18: Dramatic Reading and Performance
    - 18.4: Develop and present characters through the use of basic acting skills
  - o General Standard 16: Myth, Traditional Narrative, and Classical Literature
    - 16.12: Analyze the influence of mythic, traditional, or classical literature on later literature and film.
- Composition Strand
  - o General Standard 19: Writing
    - 19.28: Write well-organized stories or scripts with an explicit or implicit theme, using a variety of literary techniques

#### History and Social Science

- U.S. History I
  - o USI.2 Explain the historical and intellectual influences on the American Revolution and the formation and framework of the American government
  - o USI.12 Explain and provide examples of different forms of government, including democracy, monarchy, oligarchy, theocracy, and autocracy.
- American Government
  - o USG.1.2 Define the terms *citizenship*, *politics*, and *government*, and give examples of how political solutions to public policy problems are generated through interactions of citizens and civil associations with their government
  - o USG.1.3 Describe the purposes and functions of government.
  - o USG.1.4 Define and provide examples of different forms of government, including direct democracy, representative democracy, republic, monarchy, oligarchy, and autocracy.

- USG.1.9 Examine fundamental documents in the American political tradition to identify key ideas regarding limited government and individual rights.
- Purposes, Principles, and Institutions of Government in the United States of America
  - USG.3.1 Compare and contrast governments that are unitary, confederate, and federal.
- Roles of Citizens in the United States
  - USG.5.1 Explain the meaning and responsibilities of citizenship in the United States and Massachusetts.
- The Roots of Western Civilization: Ancient Greece, c. 800-300 BC/BCE
  - 7.26 Explain why the government of ancient Athens is considered the beginning of democracy and explain the democratic political concepts developed in ancient Greece.
  - 7.27 Compare and contrast life in Athens and Sparta. (H)
  - 7.28 Describe the status of women and the functions of slaves in ancient Athens. (H)
  - 7.30 Analyze the causes, course, and consequences of the Peloponnesian Wars between Athens and Sparta. (H)
  - 7.32 Describe the myths and stories of classical Greece; give examples of Greek gods and goddesses, heroes, and events, and where and how we see their names used today. (H)
  - 7.37 Explain the rise of the Roman Republic and the role of mythical and historical figures in Roman history.
  - 7.40 Describe the characteristics of slavery under the Romans

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Humanities & the Arts

Instructor: Shawn Kain

# Archetypal Biographical Template

*“Pluribus Unum: From Many, One”*

Temperament and Genealogy:

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Compromise and Authority:

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Rise of Power and “Crossing the Rubicon”:

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Conquest and Litigation:

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Sacrifice and the Divine:

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Adversaries and Allies:

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Monuments and Triumphs:

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Pride and Avarice:

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Wealth and Austerity:

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Honor in Old Age and The Manner in Which They Died:

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Fame and Glory in Posterity:

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*“The human psyche is essentially the same all over the world.” Joseph Campbell (pp.60)*

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