

INTRODUCTION

Many of our modern political, economic, and philosophical systems are rooted in Ancient Greek culture. The Ancient Greeks had one of the earliest known democracies, a rich literary tradition, and unique art and architecture, which we see copied all over the world and still used symbolically. Greek philosophy, medicine, science, and technology were all ahead of their time, and a familiarity with them is essential for understanding the world today—if for no other reason than because so much of our own culture, and even language, is based on Ancient Greek words and ideas.

The myths and gods of Ancient Greece shine a bright light onto the culture of one of the world's oldest known civilizations. Because of the influence Ancient Greek culture has on our world today, studying the myths can help explain current beliefs about science, democracy, and religion. Myths are, by definition, fictitious. But the origin stories of the Ancient Greeks were real to them—as real as our understanding of how the Earth began.

Myths explain how a culture believes they, as a people, began, how the world was created, and how they should interact with the world. Sometimes there are explicit rules that human beings must follow—offerings, rites, rituals, and/or prayers that must be observed to guarantee the balance of the universe. Myths reinforce cultural norms by demonstrating that when humans fail to meet the demands of their deities, terrible things can occur.

Most of the Greek myths revolve around their pantheon. Today's readers might even think about the Greek gods as the original superheroes—imaginary characters that dazzle us with their powers and commitment to doing good. Some Greek gods act in ways that are more typical of our modern day supervillains, trying to destroy the world and use their powers for evil. Consider our modern concept of what makes heroes powerful. What virtues do we look for in our political leaders, and what traits do our superheroes have that make them able to surpass mere mortals? Keep these questions in mind as you learn about the gods of Ancient Greece.



ABOUT THE OLYMPIANS BOOKS

ZEUS: KING OF THE GODS

HC ISBN 978-1-59643-625-1 • PB ISBN: 978-1-59643-431-8
\$9.99 PB/\$16.99 HC • 7.5 x 10 • Full Color Graphic Novel

The strong, larger-than-life heroes of *Zeus: King of the Gods* can summon lightning, control the sea, turn invisible, and transform themselves into any animal they choose. This first book of the series introduces Zeus, the ruler of the Olympian pantheon, and tells his story from his boyhood to his adventure-filled ascendance to supreme power.

ATHENA: GREY-EYED GODDESS

HC ISBN: 978-1-59643-649-7 • PB ISBN: 978-1-59643-432-5
\$9.99 PB/\$16.99 HC • 7.5 x 10 • Full Color Graphic Novel

The ancient pantheon comes to explosive life with epic battles, daring quests, and terrible monsters in *Athena: Grey-Eyed Goddess*. This second book of the Olympians series recounts the story of the goddess of war and wisdom, from her birth through her many adventures.

HERA: THE GODDESS AND HER GLORY

HC ISBN 978-1-59643-724-1 • PB ISBN: 978-1-59643-433-2
\$9.99 PB/\$16.99 HC • 7.5 x 10 • Full Color Graphic Novel

Hera: The Goddess and Her Glory, introduces readers to the Queen of the Gods and Goddesses in the Olympian Pantheon. This is her story—and the story of the many heroes who sought and won her patronage, including Heracles and Jason.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GEORGE O'CONNOR'S first graphic novel, *Journey Into Mohawk Country*, used as its sole text the actual historical journal of the seventeenth-century Dutch trader Harmen Meyndertsz van den Bogaert. It told the true story of how New York almost wasn't. He is now working on Olympians, an ongoing series retelling the classic Greek myths in comics form. In addition to his graphic novel career, Mr. O'Connor has published several children's picture books, including the *New York Times* best-selling *Kapow!*, *Sally and the Some-Thing*, and *Uncle Bigfoot*. He lives in Brooklyn, NY.

OBJECTIVES

This guide will provide teachers with the background knowledge necessary to effectively teach *Zeus: King of the Gods* and other books in the Olympians series. It includes commentary on both content and format.

Most people are familiar with some of the Greek gods, and Ancient Greece appears somewhere in every student's curriculum. Comics, one of the most unique and culturally significant literary forms in American storytelling, are just coming into common use in academic settings. This guide equips teachers with the skills and vocabulary necessary to use this nontraditional format in the classroom in order to meet curricular standards in areas such as English, language arts, social studies and visual arts.

USING THIS GUIDE TO TEACH THE OLYMPIANS SERIES WILL HELP STUDENTS TO:

- Know the names of each Olympian and understand their significance
- Put Greek mythology into its historical context as a reflection of the political, economic, geographic, and socio-cultural climate of the times



- Think critically about contemporary American heroes and our relationship to them
- Develop a better understanding of the comics medium
- Identify comics building blocks and use comics vocabulary correctly
- Contrast and compare comics structure to prose narratives

BASIC VOCABULARY FOR COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

PANEL: The frame in which each image appears.

GUTTER: The space between panels. It typically indicates a moment of transition.

SPLASH PAGE: A page with one image filling it.

SPEECH BUBBLES: Text that indicates what characters are saying, usually contained in a bubble-like shape. Also referred to as "word balloons." The stem of a speech bubble is usually sharp and pointy.

THOUGHT BALLOONS: Text that indicates what characters are thinking, usually contained in a balloon-like shape. The stem of a thought balloon is usually a trail of bubbles.

TEXT BOX: A box that contains narration, not necessarily spoken by any character.

MOTION LINES: Lines that indicate a character's movement.

SOUND EFFECTS: An onomatopoeic representation of a sound, often presented as part of the artwork.

GRAPHIC NOVEL: A long-form work in comics format; not necessarily fiction.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- www.readwritethink.org/materials/comic/vocabulary.html
- www.ancientgreece.com/s/Main_Page
- www.mythweb.com

TEACHING LITERARY ANALYSIS

All prose works have narrative structure. In a graphic novel, that narrative structure is built on the union between text and image. The very same literary devices and vocabulary are used in discussing a graphic novel. Students should be able to discern, for example, information about the plot, the characters, the setting, themes, perspective, etc.

In some cases, pictures make things clearer than they are in prose, and most students are more comfortable interpreting pictures. For example: In a comic there is no ambiguity about what a character or a setting looks like.

In other cases, interpreting pictures is more difficult, and more inference is required. Visual details can also be more subtle and carry information that might not initially seem vital to the story. For example: Why are some panels bigger than others? Why does the “camera angle” or perspective change when it does?

These inquiries often come as a surprise to students as they may be less accustomed to doing a close reading of pictures as they are of text. They may be surprised to find that reading pictures is not as simple as it seems. Hyper-emphasis on image during a lesson can lead to much greater clarity on literary terms such as foreshadowing, onomatopoeia, metaphor, etc., both for the reading of comics and prose works.

TEACHING ART APPRECIATION/CRITIQUE

Comics art—sequential art—is often said to have its roots in some very traditional art mediums: cave paintings, hieroglyphs, and tapestries, just to name a few. Comics artists use the very same concepts in their artwork as other visual artists, including line, color, space, texture, value, form, and shape. A comics artist’s decisions about materials, style, composition, and packaging are all artistic decisions that profoundly

affect the narrative. Critiquing comics art can generally be looked at in two ways. The first is, does the art stand on its own? The second, does it tell the story well?

The combination of art and writing in graphic novels offers a wonderful way to approach storytelling from two separate academic disciplines, and such interdisciplinary units make team teaching a viable and exciting option. The most obvious possibility is for an art teacher and a language arts teacher to work together to have students create their own comic. Such a project could easily explore literary tropes, art history, creative writing, and artwork.

A graphic novel like *Zeus: King of the Gods* also provides the opportunity for language arts teachers to work with history and/or social studies teachers to explore history, and to work with science teachers to explore the science behind things the Greeks believed were caused by gods, like lightning.



ZEUS: KING OF THE GODS—QUESTIONS

The first six pages establish the setting of the story, relying on lots of space and few words. How does this choice convey the setting? How would you rewrite those first few pages if you could rely only on words to convey the same feeling? If you were making a movie, what would the music for this scene sound like?

Gaea is female. Does this surprise you? Why or why not? Do you think of the Earth as being either male or female? How about God?

PAGE 4-5: It's strange that the gods of time were ageless. They are also described as tall and beautiful, but somehow they have siblings who are ugly and horrible. What do you make of this? Does O'Connor offer an explanation? Look at all the places where time is mentioned—what's the big deal with time?

How many Titans were there? Can you name them and list their characteristics?

PAGE 14-15: These two pages are visually very striking. **PAGE 14** has just one panel with a full picture of Zeus in front of some mountains. Then on **PAGE 15**, we see many panels, each with a small piece of Zeus. Why do you think O'Connor chose to do this? What effect does it have?

There are many women in Zeus's life. Who are they and how do they influence him?

PAGE 30: There are no words on this page. Why? Would you add words? If so, what would they be?

How does the myth of Zeus explain why our continents are laid out the way they are? What is a modern explanation?

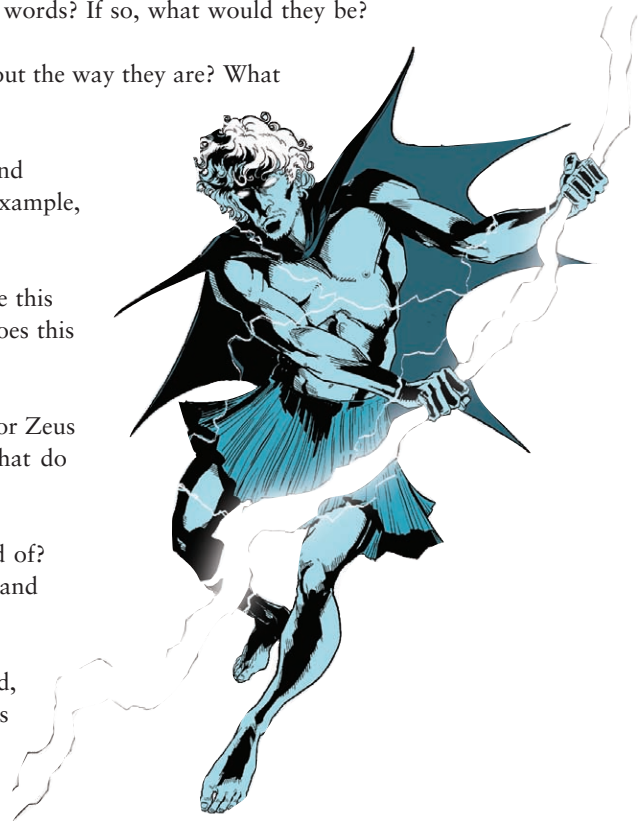
Size, scale, and time are hugely important in the story of Zeus, and O'Connor's art takes full advantage of this in his drawings, for example, **PAGE 41**. Where else do size and time matter?

PAGE 62: "But Zeus had too much of his father in him." Compare this to **PAGE 10**: Who else had too much of his father in him? What does this mean? How are fathers and sons depicted in this story?

This book ends after a series of great battles. Much has changed for Zeus and his family. And yet, there is still a great deal of tension. What do you think will happen next? Why?

Was Zeus real? What other ancient Greek heroes have you heard of? Which are "real?" How do myths blur the lines between gods and people?

There is a whole lot of family drama in Zeus's life. If he's a god, why can't he just solve this nonsense? Which other family members



could be seen as part of the problem? Is there a family member you would expect might be more helpful?

Several times we are told, “That’s a story for another day.” What do you make of this? What effect does this self-conscious appearance of the narrator have on the story?

ATHENA: GREY-EYED GODDESS—QUESTIONS

How do you think Metis felt when she was eaten and forgotten by Zeus? Have you ever had a similar experience with betrayal?

PAGE 9: “He had too much of his father in him,” the narrator tells us after Zeus has eaten his wife Metis—just as his father, Kronos, ate all of Zeus’s siblings. Do you think that eating your family members can be an inherited trait? Can the desire for control and power that lead to the eating of family members be inherited? Why or why not? What sort of traits or characteristics are inherited?

PAGE 11: When Zeus’s head begins to hurt, the other gods decide to remedy it by splitting his skull open—clearly not a solution to recommend to mortal man! What other things can the gods in this story do that humans cannot? Why do you think the Greeks gave their gods these specific powers and capabilities?

Athena is born a teenager. Do you think that was difficult for her to deal with? What do you think it would be like to be born at age sixteen?

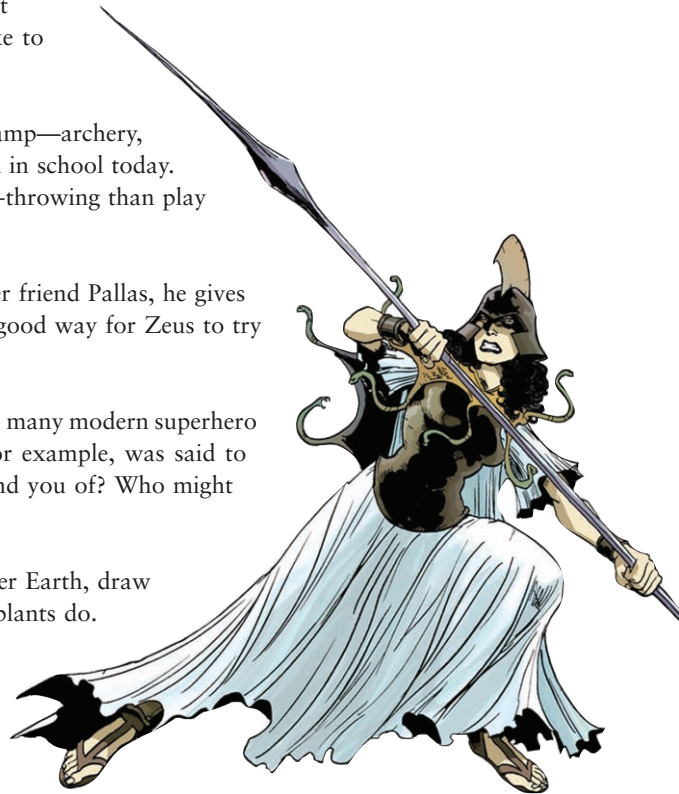
Most of the Greek pursuits that Athena learns at Triton’s camp—archery, discus-throwing, swordplay—are not the sports you learn in school today. Why do you think that is? Would you rather learn discus-throwing than play volleyball or basketball?

PAGE 24: When Zeus accidentally causes Athena to kill her friend Pallas, he gives her his cloak to make amends. Do you think that was a good way for Zeus to try to fix things? What might have been a better option?

The Greek gods are like the superheroes of the past. In fact, many modern superhero stories are based on ancient Greeks. Wonder Woman, for example, was said to have come from Ancient Greece. Who does Athena remind you of? Who might play her in a movie?

PAGE 31: The Gigantes, some of the first children of Mother Earth, draw power from the Earth, similar to the way that trees and plants do. Why don’t humans have the ability to draw power in a similar way? What do people get power from instead?

PAGE 40: “Unfortunately for Medusa, her beauty caught the eye of Poseidon.” Can being beautiful ever be a bad



thing? Can you think of examples from other myths, from histories, and from your own life of how being beautiful had negative effects?

In Ancient Greece, gods frequently appeared to heroes to give them help. If the Greek gods were around today, who do you think they would be helping?

PAGE 47: When Perseus goes to see the Graeae, he steals their eye and tells them he will only return it if they give him information. Are stealing and bribery generally good tactics to get what you want? Do you think there are situations in which they would be excusable? If so, is this one of them?

The Greek gods often punish humans who oppose their wishes—for example, giving Medusa snake-hair, and turning Arachne into a spider. Do you think these two punishments were just? How do you think your life would be different if you believed there was a god who might descend at any instant to chastise you?

PAGE 66: “Our picture of Athena is now complete,” say the Fates, standing in front of a tapestry of Athena. How does the visual representation on that page (the tapestry) differ from the “picture of Athena” made up of the words and pictures of Athena’s story? Which, in your opinion, is a better representation of Athena? Why?

Athena and Ares share the role of the patron god/goddess of war. Ares is described as the god of battle and warfare, while Athena is known as the goddess of “the beneficial side of war.” Does war have a beneficial side, and if so, what do you think it is?

Athena’s story is narrated by the three Fates, who measure the spans of human lives. The Fates are the incarnation of the belief that everything that happens is preordained, and that nothing happens through chance or through human agency. How would you look at your life differently if you thought everything that happened in it was fate? How would it be the same?



HERA: THE GODDESS AND HER GLORY—QUESTIONS

Hera is the Queen of the Gods. What does that mean as far as how powerful she is? What type of relationship does she have with the other gods?

PAGE 4: How does it change your opinion of the following scenes when you know that Zeus ate his former Queen, Metis, so he could marry Hera?

PAGES 7 – 9: Hera agrees to marry Zeus and become his Queen. What are the differences between the two relationships – marriage and co-rulership? Does one compliment the other? What changes about Hera after she marries Zeus? Name at least one visual characteristic and one character trait.

What do you think about the way Hera treats the lovers and children of Zeus? Do you think she’s justified in

her behavior? Can you think of better ways to deal with these people?

If you were a marriage counselor assigned to work with Hera and Zeus, what advice would you give them? Do you think that the problems with their relationship are entirely on one side, or do both of them have things they could do better at?

PAGE 22: In this parable about Heracles' life, he chooses the more difficult path to walk down. Why does he make this choice?

In telling the stories of the Twelve Labors of Heracles, O'Connor inserts an occasional panel that depicts the Olympian Pantheon viewing and commenting on Heracles' deeds. What does the visual/storytelling structure of the gods' interaction with Heracles show you about the relationship that they have?

On **PAGE 48**, we meet Jason, of Golden Fleece fame. How does his opinion of Hera differ from Heracles' opinion? Which do you think is more correct? Is one opinion necessarily more correct than the other?

Heracles involves the occasional youth in his Twelve Labors—pictured in this story are his nephew, Iolaus, and his young friend Hylas. Do you think it was a good idea for him to bring such young people on such dangerous quests? Why might it have been more acceptable to do so in Ancient Greece than it would be in the modern day?

Through Heracles' labors, are his strength or his cleverness more important? Before you had read this re-telling of Heracles' story, would you have thought the same thing?

Think about how King Eurystheus (the guy sending Heracles on all of the labors) and Heracles are depicted. What character traits do they have in common with their appearance? Do you think that King Eurystheus really looked like that?

PAGE 64: Heracles' appearance changes from the time that he's human to the time he becomes an Olympian. What's different about how he looks? What do the changes in his appearance symbolize?

PAGES 64 – 65: If Hera is “no longer Hera, Queen of the Gods. No longer Hera, the Goddess of Marriage. No longer Hera, the wife of Zeus,” then what is she? Why would it make her happy to be stripped of those titles and connections?



OLYMPIANS SERIES—QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Are these gods perfect? What would you call their character flaws? What pages give you that idea? How does this compare with contemporary views of God?



Pick any four pages. Remove the existing text and add your own text to tell a completely different story. Alternatively, use O'Connor's text, but redraw the panels to tell a new story. Now discuss that process. Which was easier for you? Why do you think that is? George O'Connor wrote the text and drew the art, but many comics are created by teams. Consider dividing students into pairs or groups and divide responsibilities.

One of the main functions of a culture's religion is to maintain social order, to give people rules by which to live their lives. What can you tell about Greek culture by studying their gods? What would you deduce to be the values of Ancient Greek citizens?

We know about these myths through various media, including epic poetry, architecture, and decorative artifacts. What do you think future cultures will use to understand us? What kinds of interpretations do you think they will come up with?

Most human characteristics are evident in these gods. Are there some personality traits that seem more human than others?

Think of all of the "things" for which there are gods: war, the hearth, love, etc. What is missing, and why do you think that is? If you had to come up with a similar system of gods for the present day, would you need more or fewer gods? How about a god of technology? What might he or she be like?

How would you describe O'Connor's "style"? His writing style? His artistic style?

What similarities and differences do you notice in the storytelling in comics, prose, and film? Why might a person choose each to tell a particular story?



HADES COMING SOON...



ABOUT THIS TEACHER'S GUIDE:

This Teachers' Guide was created by Hollis Rudiger, a former Spanish teacher and school librarian. She likes good stories in all formats.

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