

# **“Polyphemus”**

## **Lesson Plan for Teachers 2017**

### **Overview:**

This lesson plan will provide teachers with additional information about Thomas Wolfe, methods of analysis for his short story “Polyphemus,” and a brief background of the story’s historical context. The information will provide material for discussion of the text as a companion to the “Telling Our Tales” student writing competition.

### **Objectives:**

1. Students will create a work of fiction based on their own personal experiences or the experiences of someone they know.
2. Students will be able to explain how Thomas Wolfe's writing was based on his experiences.
3. Students will be able to identify major themes in the story “Polyphemus” and the cyclops myth from *The Odyssey*, and connect those themes to ideas from their own lives.

*Suitable for classes in grades 4-12.*

#### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4-12.3**

Grades 4-5: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

Grades 6-8: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

Grades 9-12: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

#### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4-12.2**

Grades 4-5: Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text.

Grade 6: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

Grades 7-8: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; including further grade appropriate analysis.

Grades 9-10: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

Grades 11-12: Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze the development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

#### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4-12.4**

Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on (grade appropriate) reading content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

## Narratives for Teacher Reference

### Thomas Wolfe:

Thomas Clayton Wolfe was born on October 3, 1900 in Asheville, North Carolina. He was the last of eight children born to William Oliver Wolfe (1851-1922) and Julia Elizabeth Westall (1860-1945), but he would live together with his whole family for only a short time. Julia Wolfe purchased the Old Kentucky Home boardinghouse in 1906 to accommodate the numerous tourists visiting Asheville, and moved herself and a young Thomas to the house about one month after purchasing it.

Separated from “the tumultuous, unhappy, warm centre of his home,” Wolfe despised the lack of privacy that accompanied sharing living space with strangers from all over country. He may have lost a sense of privacy or home, but gained a considerable quantity of writing material. Wolfe would later earn his reputation as an autobiographical writer in his first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel* (published October 1929), where he used his “filing cabinet” memory to describe his experiences growing up in Asheville and the Old Kentucky Home boardinghouse.

The novel was well-received in much of the United States, but it earned him infamy at home. Asheville residents easily recognized themselves and people they knew within the work, and Wolfe received a horde of angry letters from Ashevilleans displeased with the book’s portrayal of themselves and people they knew. He would not dare return home until 1937.

While Wolfe did not return to Asheville for many years, he did continue to write about the world around him and his experiences within it. He carried notebooks with him and jotted down notes when he overheard interesting conversations or when inspiration struck. Much of Wolfe’s work consisted of short stories that he wrote to make ends meet because he managed his finances poorly.

Wolfe’s novels and short stories told of his travels all over the country and the world, but he always returned to his roots in North Carolina. His stories of the land and its people make up what is arguably his finest writing. His work was famous throughout the United States and other countries, particularly Germany, where his work was later banned after he raised the alarm on oppression of the Nazi government in 1937. Wolfe continued observing and writing about the world around him until he died of tubercular meningitis in 1938. To capture the spirit of Wolfe’s efforts, William Faulkner once said of Wolfe’s writings:

*He had tried hardest to take all the experience that he was capable of observing and imagining and put it down in one book, on the head of a pin. He had the courage to experiment...to write nonsense, to be foolish, to be sentimental, in the attempt to get down the—that single moving and passionate instance of man's struggle.*

In writing about humanity and his adventures as a part of it, Wolfe captured moments in time, but also the essence of life as a human being in North Carolina, the United States, and the world.

## **“Polyphemus” by Thomas Wolfe**

Thomas Wolfe was possibly the best educated American writer of his era. A voracious reader in his own right, Wolfe studied English at UNC-Chapel Hill, and playwriting as a graduate student at Harvard University. As a writer, he often demonstrates his knowledge of classic literature and ancient mythology by using references to various Greek myths and their moral messages.

One example of this is his short story “Polyphemus,” which was first published in the *North American Review* in 1935, then merged with another story for publication in the short story collection *From Death to Morning* later that year. Keeping with the practice of writing about his home state, the new combined story “The Men of Old Catawba” was an historical and cultural profile of North Carolina and its people. The story begins by describing the Native American tribes in “Old Catawba,” Wolfe’s fictional name for North Carolina. He describes the natives’ ill-fated interactions with early explorers led by a one-eyed in the story “Polyphemus.”

The one-eyed Spaniard’s exploits share similarities both with multiple European explorers and with the myth of Polyphemus the cyclops in *The Odyssey*. It is likely that elements of the one-eyed Spaniard’s story come from Wolfe’s knowledge of real-life explorers. In U.S. history, it is not uncommon to find Europeans who came to America in search of gold and glory, happened upon inquisitive natives, often damaged relations with those natives, and after a long period of wandering and much violence the left empty-handed.

While Thomas Wolfe is known to write much based on history, there is no one explorer that fits the story and description of the one-eyed Spaniard. Most of the explorers to reach the Outer Banks weren’t Spanish. French and English expeditions under Giovanni da Verrazano (an Italian explorer serving France who was blown into the Outer Banks by a storm) and Philip Amadas/Arthur Barlowe tell of similar exploits in the mid to late 16<sup>th</sup> century exploring Eastern North Carolina and encounters with Native Americans there. While not in North Carolina, John Smith’s accounts of his adventures in Jamestown, Virginia have a familiar tone as he tried to persuade the settlers to abandon the search for gold and focus on living in their new land.

There are several Spanish explorers who made their way through North Carolina, including Lucas Vasques de Allyon who established a small settlement at Cape Fear, but it failed because of disease and food shortages. Another Spaniard to make his way through North Carolina is Juan Pardo, who made his way up from Parris Island, SC into Western North Carolina and East Tennessee. During this expedition, he constructed a fort, Fort San Juan de Xualla, near present day Morganton, NC which is coincidentally near Catawba County.

“Polyphemus” shows Thomas Wolfe’s fascination with Native American culture, as he changes his home state’s name from “North Carolina” to “Old Catawba,” based on the Catawba Indians from the piedmont. A proud Sioux-speaking tribe whose territory once encompassed much of what is now central North and South Carolina, this tribe would likely have been the group whom Pardo’s expedition would have encountered during much of their journey, especially nearby the garrison at Fort San Juan de Xualla. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the

Catawba people enjoyed a relatively affluent position trading both with Charlestown to the south and Jamestown to the north. Their numbers and land-holdings dwindled over time due to war, disease, famine, and Euro-American encroachment on their territory. Today they exist as a group of about 2,200 members on a reservation near Rock Hill, SC.

The parallels of Wolfe's story to the cyclops myth are a bit more complex. During his travels Odysseus's thirst for adventure takes him to strange lands where he explores what resources the land offers. He also finds lands inhabited by "uncivilized" groups of people or monsters. In the case of the encounter with Polyphemus, it appears that Odysseus' curiosity gets him in trouble. Odysseus and his crew, hunting for goats, find a cave belonging to the one-eyed giant. While the giant was not at home the crew finds his goats, and cheeses. Odysseus insists that they stay to receive the giant's gifts. We soon learn that Odysseus should have respected some else's property. Rather than give his "guests" a feast, the Cyclops feasts on them. In the example Odysseus displayed poor judgement and a lack of self-control by focusing on taking the giant's resources. But, using patience, and brains over brawn, Odysseus escapes the giant by blinding him, thus, saving his whole crew from slaughter. As the men row back to their ship, the Cyclops hurls boulders at them from the shore, Odysseus again loses his self-control yelling to Polyphemus on the beach, "Cyclops – if any man on the face of the earth should ask who blinded you, shamed you so – say Odysseus, raider of cities, he gouged out your eye..." Polyphemus happened to be the son of Poseidon, Lord of the Sea. It was very poor judgement on the part of Odysseus as Polyphemus called on Poseidon to avenge him and it would take ten long years before Odysseus made it home.

Wolfe's story also models the ancient Greek myths in the sense that it reads like a fable. Common moral lessons to be found in Greek mythology include: Good always wins; You cannot change Fate; The dangers of Arrogance and Hubris; Sacrifice yourself for your loved ones; Fight for your homeland; Giving into temptation might end in catastrophe; Love your family and respect your elders; Do not defy the natural order. Wolfe's tale of the one-eyed Spaniard gives much of the same impression, particularly warning against the dangers of arrogance and hubris and the blindness they can create, almost literally in this case with the explorers' ignorance of the bountiful resources of the land they were walking upon.

## **Procedures**

*Procedures may be adapted for the needs of the class*

*Estimated Time: 60-80 minutes*

### ***Preparation:***

1. Share the photograph of Thomas Wolfe from the Wolfe Memorial website
2. Share the image of "Map of Native Tribes" from the Wolfe Memorial website.
3. Use the summary section of the myth of the cyclops from The Odyssey and print for the class found at: <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/odyssey/section5.rhtml> .
4. Download and print the following handouts for students from the Wolfe Memorial Website –
  - Thomas Wolfe's short story "Polyphemus"

- Vocabulary List 2017 and Early English Vocabulary
- Guidelines and Instructions 2017, Submission Form 2017, Ideas for Student Consideration 2017

### **Step 1: Introduce Thomas Wolfe and the short story**

- Display photograph of Thomas Wolfe and ask who within the class knows of him and what he did. Explain that he was an author from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who was born and raised in Asheville and wrote heavily based on his own life experiences. Further explain that his work often branched out into the story of others or his own state more than just himself.
- Pass out copies of “Polyphemus” and the accompanying vocabulary sheet/spelling guide and give students 15 minutes to read through the story.
- Discuss main elements of the story:
  - Spanish explorer in search of gold, possessing only one eye
  - Blown into Outer Banks by storm, but searches land for gold anyways.
  - Initial curiosity of explorers and Native Americans gives way to reign of terror against Native Americans by explorers.
  - The importance of Polyphemus and the explorers all being “one eyed men during their vain search for gold, all the while sneering at the natural resources his group happens upon in their travels.
  - The explorers leave empty-handed, taking no advantage of the treasures of the land they left behind.
  - Note the use of “Shakespearean” English spelling when Wolfe quotes Polyphemus’ journal. For a prominent example to help illustrate, point out that Sir Walter Raleigh, the namesake of North Carolina’s state capital, never spelled his name the way it is spelled today.
- Explain how Wolfe is writing those entries in early modern, or “Shakespearean” English, which did not have standardized spellings for its words. English spelling would not begin to be standardized until the late 15<sup>th</sup> century with the spread of the printing press to England, when it was soon used for government record keeping. However, it was not until the development of the dictionaries of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the spelling of English words was concretely established.
- Note how the story reads like a fable. Ask students if they know what a fable is. If they don’t, tell them a fable is a story, often a fantastical one, that is used to explain a moral or virtue. If they already know, simply ask students what moral messages could be taken from the story.
- Ask students what morals could be learned from Wolfe’s “Polyphemus” story. If they have difficulty, suggest the following:
  - Many people are guilty of the very things they accuse others of doing.
  - Single-minded pursuit of a goal or treasure can lead one to overlook other treasures or opportunities. In other words, behaving like the “one-eyed men.”

- Don't set unrealistic goals and take your anger out on others when goals are not achieved.
- Acting with the arrogance of a single belief may not make it the right thing to do.

### Step 2: Discuss myth of Polyphemus the Cyclops

- Pass out copies of a synopsis of The Odyssey containing the encounter with Polyphemus. Give students 5-7 minutes to read.
- Discuss similarities between Greek Myth and Thomas Wolfe's story.
  - Seafaring explorers come upon an unknown land and find a strange "uncivilized" folk inhabiting it.
  - Initial curiosity by the explorers towards the land and its natives like Odysseus and his men.
  - The cyclops & one-eyed Spaniard Polyphemus are both the monsters (so to speak) that cause unnecessary deaths.
  - The one-eyed Spaniard and Odysseus are both arrogant in working to achieve their goals.

### Step 3: Historical Context

- Tell students about how Wolfe's story is part of a larger narrative telling the story of North Carolina and its people, and like much of his writing, is loosely based on fact and history and embellished for storytelling and/or artistic purposes.
- Note that several European explorers came through North Carolina during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and had similar experiences to those of the one-eyed Spaniard of Wolfe's story. However, none of the explorers completely fit the experiences and profile of the Spaniard of Wolfe's creation. The Spaniard is likely a composite character (multiple characters combined into one) made to suit Wolfe's storytelling purposes.
- Pull up "Map of Native Tribes" image and tell students the explorer getting the most attention in North Carolina today is likely Juan Pardo, a Spanish explorer who never traveled through the Outer Banks but did make his way through much of central North and South Carolina and eastern Tennessee. One stop on his journey occurred at the Catawba (coincidentally the name given to NC in Wolfe's story) Indian village of Jaora, where Pardo constructed a fort that is currently under archeological excavation.

**Optional Extension:** Look over the adventures of other explorers what elements of their exploits and writings match up with the adventures of Wolfe's one-eyed Spaniard. Below are some examples:

- Lucas Vasques de Allyn (Spaniard who set up a settlement likely near the mouth of the Cape Fear River that lasted only three months in 1526 before disease, dissension among the Spanish settlers, and lack of resources led to its abandonment):

*Article on de Allyn's exploits:*

<http://www.ncpedia.org/biography/ayll%C3%B3n-lucas-v%C3%A1lquez-de>

- Giovanni da Verrazzano (blown into the Outer Banks by a storm; Describes Pamlico Sound, though it's so large he believes it to be the Pacific Ocean; Reputedly eaten by natives on the island of Guadalupe in 1528):  
*Map of area of voyage, including North Carolina-*  
[http://www.nyc99.org/1500/images/verrazzano\\_detail\\_1g.jpg](http://www.nyc99.org/1500/images/verrazzano_detail_1g.jpg)
- Philip Amadas/Arthur Barlowe (made multiple trips to the Outer Banks and, unlike the Spaniard, appreciate the natural resources they find):  
*NPS Overview of Amadas/Barlowe Expedition:*  
<https://www.nps.gov/fora/learn/education/amadas-and-barlowe.htm>  
*Barlowe's (likely romanticized) account of Roanoke Island, 1584:*  
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/barlowe/barlowe.html> (read from top of pg. 7 to top of pg. 9)
- Richard Hakluyt (describes the “need” for Christianity by the Native Americans and the barbarism of the Spanish explorers):  
<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/amerbegin/exploration/text5/hakluyt.pdf>
- John Smith (Did not explore the Outer Banks, but did help establish settlement of Jamestown, VA and wanted to switch the focus away from finding gold):  
***Read quote aloud to class, “There was no talk, no hope, no work but dig gold, wash gold, refine gold, load gold --- such a bruit of GOLD that one mad fellow desired to be buried in the sands, lest they should by their art make gold of his bones!”***

#### Step 4: Activity

- Make a list of 10 different objects (on your smart board or white/chalkboard that serve very different purposes that some may find useful while others may not. You are welcome to come up with 10 objects of your own, or refer to any of the objects from the list below:
  - Flying lessons
  - Early release of latest iPhone or smartphone of your choice
  - PlayStation 4
  - New Ford Mustang
  - Concert tickets to band/musician of your choice
  - Tickets to the next Super Bowl
  - Custom fitted suit or dress
  - Full weight lifting gym set
  - 100 acres of mountaintop land
  - Your weight in gold
- Once the list is made, give students a couple of minutes to ponder which item they would want most and least. Call each item out aloud and have students raise their hands first for what they would want most, and mark a tally by each item for every student that wants that item most. Go down the list again to see who wants which item the least.
- Once the tallying is complete, take a moment as a class to notice if what some wanted most was what some wanted least. Ask the class why they wanted some items more than

others. Then ask them if they would turn down any of these items outright if they considered their worth.

- Wrap up activity by having students compare their own thoughts of the discussion with the actions of Polyphemus. How are they similar? How are they different?

**Step 5: Assignment**

- Pass out the writing contest “Guidelines and Instructions” and “Ideas for Student Consideration” sheets to class. Reiterate how Wolfe sometimes combined elements from multiple historical accounts to create a new story writing short stories and novels. Have the class think of some goals they have, along with some of the times when they have been disappointed. Go over writing assignment before wrapping up lesson.
- **Take Home Writing Assignment:** Have students write short story based on the prompts on the “Ideas for Consideration” worksheet, and following the guidelines listed on the “‘Telling our Tales’ Guidelines and Instruction” page.