

The Story of Joseph

The Story of Joseph from Genesis

Subject Area: English Language Arts Grades 9-10

Time Required: 1-2 class sessions

General Topics: Plot, characterization, authorial structuring of texts, cumulative impact of word choices, explicit meanings and drawing inferences

Average Grade Level from Readable.io: 11.1

SUMMARY

This lesson plan focuses on the story of Joseph and his family — a story that is found in the biblical book of Genesis. The lesson asks students to engage in a literary analysis of the story that will allow them to appreciate it as a work of high artistic quality. Specifically, they will pay close attention to the author's use of repetition and the presence of gaps in the plot to determine the impact these features have on how they read and interpret the story. The lesson plan includes several worksheets designed to facilitate the development of skills such as identifying gaps and repetition in a story, explaining how an author's use of repetition and gaps affects a reader's understanding of a story, and analyzing characters' roles in light of the presence of repetition and gaps in a story. The plan also includes a number of suggestions for extending this study, including comparing the biblical Joseph story to its counterpart in the Qur'an, analyzing artistic representations of scenes from the story, reading and comparing different English translations of the story, and discussing the contemporary relevance of the Joseph story.

ALIGNMENT WITH GEORGIA STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE

Reading Literary:

ELAGSE9-10RL1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

ELAGSE9-10RL3 Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

ELAGSE9-10RL4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone.)

ELAGSE9-10RL5 Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension or surprise.

Reading Informational:

ELAGSE9-10RI1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

ELAGSE9-10RI5 Analyze in detail how an author's ideas or claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs or larger portions of a text (e.g., a section or chapter).

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- identify the presence of gaps and repetition in a story;
- explain how a story's use of repetition and gaps affects their understanding of it; and
- analyze the characters' roles and articulate their evaluation of them in light of the gaps and repetition in the story.

PRIMARY SOURCES QUOTES

“But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him” (Genesis 37:4).

“Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there” (Genesis 39:1).

“And Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt’” (Genesis 41:41).

ARTWORK

Govaert Flinck, “Joseph in Prison Interpreting the Dreams of Pharaoh’s Baker and Butler” (Dutch, 1615-1660):

<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/239705/govaert-flinck-joseph-in-prison-interpreting-the-dreams-of-pharaoh's-baker-and-butler-dutch-about-1639/>

INTRODUCTION

It is a rags-to-riches tale that has captivated numerous readers over the centuries, and it continues to resonate today because it addresses timeless themes and issues, such as parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, mistaken identity, sexual intrigue and revenge. The Joseph story recounts the adventures of a person who experiences both betrayal and reconciliation within his own family, and it does so in a way that illustrates how talented writers from the ancient world could be.

The story of Joseph is found in the first book of the Bible, Genesis. While Moses has traditionally been regarded as the author of Genesis, many scholars today would argue that ancient editors wove various materials into the book’s present form some time after the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem (587 B.C.E). Stretching over 13 chapters (Genesis 37-50), the Joseph story is one of the longest narratives in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Often described as a novella, it functions as a bridge text that unites the traditions about the earlier biblical patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Genesis 12-36) with the stories in the book of Exodus that explain how the Israelites escaped their bondage in Egypt and made their 40-year journey to the promised land of Canaan. The section that immediately precedes the Joseph story centers on his father Jacob, whose name is changed to Israel (32:28-29) and whose 12 sons are the eponymous ancestors of the 12 tribes (35:23-26). Many scholars believe the Joseph story might have been an independent tradition that was attached to the stories about the patriarchs in order to explain how the Israelites got to Egypt, thereby setting the stage for the exodus

under Moses' leadership in the book that follows (see "The Exodus Tradition in the Bible" at <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/exodus-tradition-in-the-bible.aspx>). It is also worth noting that the story of Joseph is found in the 12th chapter of the Qur'an, where it is the longest single narrative in Islam's sacred text. That version of the story is treated in the "Extending the Lesson" section of this lesson plan.

This lesson focuses on some of the literary features of selected portions of the Joseph story (Genesis 37 and 39-45) that help to make it such a memorable and enjoyable read. In particular, we will look at the author's use of repetition and the presence of gaps in the plot. Through a close reading of the story, students will come to appreciate the importance of these features and the impact they have on how they read and interpret stories.

(This lesson does not include chapter 38 because its focus shifts from Joseph to other characters, Tamar and Judah. Because that story does not directly advance the plot of the Joseph story, many scholars believe that ancient editors of the biblical materials inserted it at this point in Genesis.)

This lesson requires that students have a basic understanding of the following:

- Terminology related to literature: author, plot, narrator, character, dialogue, setting, etc.
- How to analyze a literary text, especially in terms of what information is provided to and withheld from the reader
- How to compare two or more sections of a story in order to identify common vocabulary, traits and themes within them

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How is repetition used in the Joseph story? This includes repeated vocabulary, themes or patterns.
- Where do the story's plot and character development seem to have gaps? This includes what the reader does not know regarding the details of the story, the characters' thoughts and motivations, and what characters do not know about other characters.
- What effect do repetition and gaps have on how one interprets a story?

BACKGROUND

Because of its status as a sacred text for many, students (and even teachers) sometimes find it strange or difficult to treat the Bible as they would any other book and study it as a work of literature. This lesson addresses that hesitancy by encouraging students to critically analyze a biblical story and thereby come to appreciate it as a literary work of high quality.

Very few sections of the Bible are better suited to facilitate that task than the Joseph story. It is a coherent and cohesive narrative that was written by someone who was highly skilled in the craft of storytelling. For most scholars, the identity of the author, like that of those who composed much of the rest of the Bible, remains a mystery. Whatever its origin or authorship, its length and content make the Joseph story an ideal text to explore how the biblical writers made use of literary conventions like repetition and gaps to tell their stories. These two features are highlighted in this lesson because they are commonly found within biblical narratives, yet they are often missed, ignored or misunderstood by readers.

Repetition can take a variety of forms in the Bible, as it can in other literature — words, phrases, motifs, themes and sequences of actions are sometimes repeated in order to call the reader’s attention to certain aspects of the plot. Similarly, different types of gaps are present throughout the biblical writing. In some cases, details about something mentioned in the story are left out, and elsewhere the reader is kept in the dark regarding the feelings or motivations of a character. This lack of information can be as important as what is explicitly stated in a text because it creates the ambiguity and tension that draw the reader into a story. This type of analysis is important because it helps students to develop skills that are easily transferable and applicable to other literary works they will read.

PREPARATION INSTRUCTIONS

The Joseph story could be the focus of one or two class sessions, depending on the teacher’s preference. If it is to be the topic for a single session, the instructor will likely have to choose from among the various activities described below to determine which ones are most appropriate for the class. An additional session would make it more possible to include some of the activities listed in the section titled “Extending the Lesson.”

Sections of the Joseph story might be read aloud in class, but it is essential that all students read Genesis 37, 39-45 prior to the session so they will be familiar with the narrative as a whole. Three different English translations of the Bible (New Revised Standard Version; Contemporary English Version; and King James Version) are available on the Bible Odyssey website at the following link: <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/bibles.aspx>.

TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

- Egypt in the Bible - <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/places/main-articles/egypt.aspx>
- Joseph - <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/main-articles/joseph.aspx>
- Joseph and his Clothing - <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/joseph-and-his-clothing.aspx>
- Dreams in the Hebrew Bible - <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/dreams-in-the-hebrew-bible.aspx>
- Sibling Rivalries and Younger Sons in the Hebrew Bible - <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/sibling-rivalries-and-younger-sons.aspx>

A diagram of the family tree of Jacob that identifies the mother of each of his 12 sons and one daughter, along with the meanings of their names, is available at the following link: <http://www.biblechronology.org/charts/JACOB.jpg>. Those 12 sons are the eponymous ancestors of the tribes of Israel, which are each assigned a portion of the land the Israelites settle in. Joseph's portion was divided between his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh, as seen in this map showing the land that each tribe received: http://www.bibleodyssey.org/tools/map-gallery/t/map-12_tribes.aspx. In addition, there is a map of Egypt on the Bible Odyssey website that shows the area in which much of the Joseph story is set and its proximity to the land of Canaan, where the Israelites settled (<http://www.bibleodyssey.org/tools/map-gallery/e/map-egypt.aspx>).

LESSON ACTIVITIES

The session should begin with an explanation to students that this class period is going to focus on gaps — what we know and what we do not know when we read a story. Before discussing the literary gaps in the text, the chronological and cultural gaps between our world and that of the Bible should be acknowledged and recognized. This issue can be explored by having students fill in the Knowledge Gap Sheet, on which they list the gaps in their own knowledge regarding the details (Who? What? When? Where? and Why?) of the Joseph story. They will likely identify gaps in their knowledge like the following: Who were the Ishmaelites? What is a sheave? When did Joseph live? Where is Shechem? Why did Jacob have more than one wife? After a brief consideration of their knowledge gaps, the literary gaps in the story can be addressed.

Sometimes an author intentionally withholds information from us, which can create suspense and a sense of mystery. These gaps can be of different types — some are the result of missing important

details about something that is briefly mentioned (information), others are due to silence about a character’s inner thoughts or feelings about events in the story (psychology), and a third type of gap is the absence of motive for why a character speaks or acts in a certain way (motivation). We will use these three categories for our activity, and the teacher can illustrate each one in reference to another text the class has already read.

At the other end of the spectrum, at times the reader is repeatedly given the same or similar information. This, too, can take a variety of forms. Sometimes certain words or phrases are repeated over and over again. At other times, the same motif or theme keeps popping up throughout a story. Elsewhere, a set of events or sequence of actions occurs more than once. Because virtually every story contains gaps and repetition, readers alternate between fumbling around in the dark and experiencing information overload. Stories revolve around the manipulation of knowledge — what readers know, and when they know it — and an effective writer is able to dole out that knowledge to great effect.

This can be illustrated by asking students to consider a story that was recently read in class or a favorite work that they have read on their own. Ask them to think about that story from the perspective of what they knew and did not know as they read it. What gaps did they encounter that limited their knowledge about the characters and plot? How did repetition function in the story, and what effect did it have on them? The same exercise might be done by asking them to discuss a film or television show they recently viewed in terms of the gaps or repetition it contained.

The activities that follow relate to the first part of the Joseph story up until the end of Genesis 41, when Pharaoh promotes him to second in command and people from all over the world stream to Egypt for food during a famine. The same activities could also be used for the latter part of the story when Joseph is reunited with his family.

(1) Gap Identification Activity

This activity analyzes the characters and events in chapters 37, 39, 40 and 41, which contain four separate scenes.

Text	Scene	Characters
37:1-36	Joseph is sold	Joseph, Jacob, the brothers
39:1-20	Joseph in Potiphar’s house	Joseph, Potiphar, Potiphar’s wife
39:20-40:23	Joseph in prison	Joseph, the chief jailer, prisoner #1, prisoner #2
41:1-57	Joseph in Pharaoh’s court	Joseph, Pharaoh

Depending on the size of the class, assign each of the characters from each scene to a student or a group of students. Ask them to read through their text with an eye toward identifying the gaps related to their assigned character. After reading the passage, they should fill out the Gap Identification Sheet

by listing as many gaps as they can for each type (Informational, Psychological and Motivational). It will be necessary to explain to students the differences among these three types of gaps. When they have finished filling out the sheets, they should meet with the students who were assigned the other characters in their text and discuss with them how the gaps they have identified have an impact on how they read and interpret the scene. When that conversation has concluded, one person from each group should relate to the larger class the results of their study.

An example of how this might work can be seen in how the brothers are portrayed in Genesis 37:2. An informational gap can be seen in Joseph's "bad report" about his brothers that he gives to their father, Jacob. The text does not say anything more about this episode, and as a consequence the reader wonders about the report's contents and what effect it might have had on the relationships among the characters. At the same time, there is a psychological gap here as well because the reader does not know if the brothers are aware that Joseph reported them to their father. An example of a motivational gap is seen in 37:35, when Jacob's sons and daughters comfort him because he believes his favored son has been killed by an animal. Are the brothers sincerely concerned about their father's welfare, or are they simply going through the motions because that is what they are expected to do in such a situation?

Depending upon students' abilities and/or the teacher's goals, this activity can be modified by having the students look for examples of each of these types of gaps without specifying a particular character to focus on. Such an exercise could be done in pairs or small groups of students.

(2) Gap Filling Activity

The presence of gaps in a story makes multiple interpretations of it possible. This activity asks students to fill in the gaps they identified in the previous exercise by supplying the missing information. In doing so, they will, in effect, be limiting the interpretive options. To take the example mentioned earlier regarding the presentation of the brothers in chapter 37, this means the student supplies the content of the "bad report" they brought to Jacob and explains whether or not the brothers knew about it. In addition, the student identifies the motivation for why the brothers comfort Jacob when he thinks Joseph has been killed. In this way, a different story is created as the plot takes new twists and turns. The student is also asked to describe how the filled gaps affect the way the reader interprets the narrative. The Gap Filling Sheet is completed by students in relation to the same character and text they worked on for the Gap Identification Sheet. They then reconvene with the students who were assigned the other characters in their text and discuss with them how the filled gaps have an impact on how they read and interpret the scene. When that conversation has concluded, one person from each group should relate to the larger class the results of their study. If the students have not been assigned particular characters, they should attempt to fill in some of the gaps they identified in the previous activity.

(3) Repetition Activity

In the same groups, students then consider the presence of repetition in the Joseph story. In some cases, certain words or phrases are repeated within the texts they have been assigned. This is seen, for example, in the several references to the brothers' hatred of Joseph in chapter 37, and in the almost identical words Joseph uses to interpret the two dreams of his fellow prisoners in chapter 40. It is also present through the common motifs that unite the different sections of the story, as in the triple reference to double dreams and their interpretations in chapters 37, 40 and 41, and the key role that Joseph's clothing plays in chapters 37, 39 and 41 (twice).

Yet another form of repetition can be noted in a recurring set of events that have the same pattern. For example, Joseph hits rock bottom three times, only to overcome the odds three times by rising to a position of prominence under someone in authority: first Potiphar, then the chief jailer, and finally Pharaoh. Students should identify as many examples of repetition as they can, and then discuss how each one contributes to their understanding of the story. Upon completion of this conversation, a spokesperson from each group reports back to the entire class about what new insights were learned regarding how repetition functions in the Joseph story.

The teacher should explain how each type of repetition works so that the differences between them are clear in the students' minds. In addition, the teacher should tell the students that not every type of repetition is found in each passage, so they will likely find only one or two examples of repetition in their assigned text.

The students are then asked to complete the Repetition Analysis Form, which asks each one to analyze in detail a specific example of repetition in the Joseph story. The purpose of this assignment is to help students to appreciate that repetition can be more than simply an unnecessary restatement of the same information, and is often an intentional literary device used by an author that has a significant impact on one's experience of reading a story.

Knowledge Gap Sheet

Your name:

When you read through the Joseph story, you probably discovered that there were some gaps in your knowledge regarding the details that raised some questions in your mind and might have confused you. These gaps can be the result of many things, including unfamiliar words, unusual practices, and the cultural and chronological distance that separates the world of the Bible from our own. On this sheet, identify two examples of a knowledge gap you had for each of the categories listed below (Who? What? When?, etc.).

Who?

- 1.
- 2.

What?

- 1.
- 2.

When?

- 1.
- 2.

Where?

- 1.
- 2.

Why?

- 1.
- 2.

Gap Identification Sheet

Your name:

Assigned text:

Assigned character:

Carefully read through your assigned text and identify three gaps that relate to your character. Remember the following definitions:

Informational Gap: omission of important details about something the text mentions

Psychological Gap: omission of information about a character's inner thoughts or feelings about events in the story

Motivational Gap: omission of a motive or reason for why a character speaks or acts in a certain way

Type of Gap	Verse Number(s)	Description of the Gap	Effect on the Reader
Informational			
Psychological			
Motivational			

Gap Filling Sheet

Your name:

Assigned text:

Assigned character:

Carefully read through your assigned text and fill in one of the gaps in each type you identified earlier that relate to your character. Remember the following definitions:

Informational Gap: omission of important details about something the text mentions

Psychological Gap: omission of information about a character's inner thoughts or feelings about events in the story

Motivational Gap: omission of a motive or reason for why a character speaks or acts in a certain way

Type of Gap	Description of the Gap	How the Gap is Filled	Effect on the Story
Informational			
Psychological			
Motivational			

Repetition Analysis Form

Your name:

Identify one example of repetition in the Joseph story and analyze the role it plays in the narrative.

What type of repetition is it? (Word, phrase, theme, motif, set of actions, etc.)

Where is the repetition found? (Be specific about chapters and verses, and where it occurs in the story.)

What impact does the repetition have on the story? (In other words, how would the story be different without the repetition?)

What effect does the repetition have on you as a reader? (In other words, how is your understanding of the meaning of the story changed by the repetition?)

EXTENDING THE LESSON

Multiple possibilities for further exploring the Joseph story are offered below.

1. The Muslim Joseph

“Truly, in the story of Joseph and his brothers there are signs for those who inquire.”
(Qur’an 12:7)

This activity responds to the invitation above by exploring how the Joseph story is recounted in the Qur’an, the sacred text of Islam, where it is both similar to and different from its biblical counterpart.

For an overview of the Islamic version of the story see this link:

<http://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/joseph-in-the-quran.aspx>.

The relative brevity of the Qur’an’s account makes comparative study of it and the biblical story easy, and different approaches to this type of analysis are possible. Students might look at both versions in their entirety to determine where they converge and diverge, or they might examine a particular scene or character side-by-side. Alternatively, they might study the Islamic text like they did the biblical one by paying attention to the presence of gaps and repetition within it.

The text of the Qur’an’s chapter on Joseph in English can be found at the following link:

<https://quran.com/12>. A nice feature of this site is that you can click on the links on the left side of the screen and listen to each of the verses in its original Arabic form. If a hard copy version of the Qur’an is preferred, the following are reliable English translations that are readily available:

The Qur’an: A New Annotated Translation, translated by A. J. Droge (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013).

The Qur’an: A New Translation, translated by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

2. The Joseph Story in Art

The Joseph story has been the frequent subject of artists. The links below connect to a few examples of how some scenes have been depicted in art. Students might view these images and analyze them in light of how they compare to the biblical story. What does the painting add that is not in the written story? What is missing in the painting that is part of the written story? How does the painting cause the viewer to think about the written story in a new way?

- Diego Velázquez, “Joseph’s Bloody Cloak Brought to Jacob” (1630):
<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/tools/image-gallery/j/joseph-clothing-1>

- Rembrandt van Rijn, “Joseph Accused by Potiphar's Wife” (1655): <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/tools/image-gallery/j/joseph-accused-by-potiphars-wife.aspx>
- Bacchiacca, “Joseph Pardons his Brothers” (c. 1515): <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/tools/image-gallery/j/joseph-brothers-bacchiacca.aspx>
- Biagio d’Antonio, “The Story of Joseph” (c. 1485) (depicting multiple episodes from Joseph’s life): <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/563/biagio-d-antonio-the-story-of-joseph-italian-about-1485/>
- Biagio d’Antonio, “The Story of Joseph” (c. 1485) (a companion panel to the image above, depicting different episodes from Joseph’s life): <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435666>
- Behzad, “Yusuf and Zulaikha” (1488) (Persian painting of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife): https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6c/Yusef_Zuleykha.jpg
- In addition, depictions of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife in multiple media can be found here: http://www.womeninthebible.net/paintings_joseph_potiphar.htm

3. Comparing English Translations of the Joseph Story

The Joseph story was originally written in Hebrew, and throughout the centuries many translations of it have been published in English and other languages. Using the same groups that were formed for the gaps and repetition activities, students might look at how their scene is described in two or more translations of the Bible and then discuss whether the differences between them have an effect on how the reader interprets the story. The Bible Odyssey link cited above that contains three English translations of the Bible is an excellent resource for this activity (<http://www.bibleodyssey.org/bibles.aspx>).

4. The Contemporary Relevance of the Joseph Story

The Joseph story addresses and touches on a number of themes that are relevant for modern readers, and these topics might be discussed in the classroom. In particular, students could be asked to consider what lessons the Joseph story might have to offer regarding the following:

- Sibling rivalry
- Parental favoritism
- Revenge
- Immigration
- Refugees
- Famine and food supplies
- Forgiveness