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Interlochen Arts Academy

Middle Eastern Literature, 12th grade English elective

The Tale of Layla and Majnun

Contemporary Use of the Legend in the Arts (Lesson Plan)

70 Minutes Class Block

Introduction to the students: *Layla and Majnun* is a love story like no other. Well, it's a little bit like *Romeo and Juliet*, but it's older, so it wins for originality.

For homework, you have already completed the chapters of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* where Rasheed teases Layla and Tariq, calling them "Layla and Majnun," alluding to this famous, timeless love story. For the first 20 minutes of class, read the following two texts, and then discuss them with your table partner. These texts include the text of the poem itself, translated by James Atkinson, and the Program Notes from a recent opera/dance collaboration production of Layla and Majnun.

Read the following and discuss with your table partner:

- 1.) The poem: [Translation by James Atkinson](#) (excerpt) James Atkinson is a British Persian scholar who died in 1852.
- 2.) [Program Notes from the Mark Morris Dance Company Production of Layla and Majnun](#)

Watch as a large group:

As a whole class, we will watch both of these videos to learn about the story that has captivated the Persian and Arab worlds for centuries. Then, be prepared to share your observations during class discussion about Khaled Hosseini's use of this myth to enhance *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

[An Animated Version of Qais & Layla](#)

[The Mark Morris Dance Company and Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble Production of Layla and Majnun, a dance/opera collaboration](#)

Harkness Discussion:

Using their texts of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, by Khaled Hosseini, students will discuss the many allusions to this story in that novel, as well as the adaptation of the story to create the dance/opera collaboration. Students will point out specific places in the novel that derive from the Layla and Majnun story. I will guide their discussion to an exploration of how this story has been reinvented in other cultures, such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. They will offer ideas of other contemporary stories that seem to be inspired by Layla and Majnun, as well as themes from the story that make it universally and artistically relevant today.

Essay Assignment:

Depending on time, students will either:

- Participate in an online discussion demonstrating their understanding of the importance and relevance of the Layla and Majnun myth.
- or
- Write a formal essay analyzing the use of this story by Khaled Hosseini in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and in the production of the Mark Morris Dance Company and Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble.

This will be done individually either during a subsequent class block or for homework.

Reflective Response:

I have taught this lesson several times in conjunction with teaching *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, by Khaled Hosseini. While the students do not understand the allusion to Layla and Majnun when they first read about it in Hosseini's novel, they have such a deeper appreciation for Hosseini's work when they do understand the significance of the story. One of Khaled Hosseini's main characters is named Laila, and she is similar to the fiery Layla of the original story. So much of the symbolism in the novel comes from the original story, as does the story structure of the novel itself, although there are many ironic twists as Hosseini makes the story his own!

Students especially appreciate seeing the work that the Mark Morris Dance Company and Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble have done with this work. While they are huge fans of Hosseini's novel (every time I teach it!) they are even more moved by the Morris/Ma production as it speaks to their own experiences as artists. Many of my students are dancers, instrumental musicians, actors, and vocalists, so this is a powerful lesson, every time.

I believe that along with an artistic connection to the tale, students gain a real appreciation for the beauty of this story and the richness of its survival throughout so many centuries. They understand it as a cultural foundation stone of the Middle East, a story that preserves the ideals of many peoples and is testament to the timeless attraction of young love, deep passion, family ties and fierce loyalty.

The culminating project for the course is an artistic representation that synthesizes different works of literature or artistic performances that they encountered. Students are often inspired by this story to create a dance, compose a piece of music, or write poetry that reflects their understanding of Layla and Majnun.

While this is not a lesson that increases my students' understanding of the religions of the Middle East, I believe that starting with a love story that is so relevant to them at their young age motivates them to be even more curious about the peoples of the Middle East. By connecting with this story of forbidden love, students begin their understanding of Middle Eastern peoples with a recognition of the universal experience of falling in love, as told through captivating art.

After gaining an appreciation for this legend and the tradition of Arab and Persian poetry that has sprung from it, my students are more prepared to encounter the religions of the Middle East. They begin with Rumi, a poet whose personal history and poetry prove fascinating for teenagers. Connecting with Rumi's love poems prepares my students to become interested in Sufi Islam and the religious aspect of Rumi's work. This new lens through which to view Islam opens their mind to the study of the religion in general, both its ancient history and the institutions of contemporary Islam. Students further study Christianity and Judaism, mostly in the context of Islam, having begun with that newest of religions. They are always surprised to learn that many characters/historical figures in the stories of the (usually) more familiar Christianity and Judaism are revered by and central to Islam.

Starting with what students value, romantic love, and letting that universal experience guide them into a deeper understanding of the mysteries and commonalities of the Abrahamic religions has been my method for the past several years. I'm still new at this, so my practice of introducing students to religions of the Middle East will evolve as my interdisciplinary course continues.