



Overview: The idea of cross-comparison may be familiar to experienced teachers but less so to teachers whose primary focus in classroom instruction has concentrated on the classic “one at a time” approach. While highly esteeming the value of closely examining a single text in isolation, the Common Core Standards encourage teachers to pair up texts and explore with their students the different ways in which two different works can speak about the same theme, motif, event, story, or human circumstance. The lesson which follows is intended to be a kind of “plug and play” support for teachers new to the technique of cross-comparison. It focuses on two works, both in translation, and asks readers to explore the different choices of the translators. (Lesson Duration: 3 hours)

Standards:

- **RL.11-12.4.** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)
- **RL.11-12.7.** Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry); evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

Objectives:

- Students will examine the impact of a translator’s choices and explore how multiple interpretations of a single literary work can provide a greater and more profound understanding of that text.
- Students will explore the impact of one word choice over another and the effects of those choices on the reader.

Materials:

Classroom copies of the Anglo-Saxon poem “The Ruin” in translation (reprinted below). Note: Please observe fair use guidelines regarding classroom use of published works.¹

Procedure:

Before the Lesson

Students should have received copies of the translations for individual perusal.

¹Generally, fair use guidelines allow multiple copies of a poem (that is, one per student per class) provided that the material is brief, spontaneously copied, and not re-used over and over or placed into a classroom anthology. Up to 250 words for a poem is generally permitted. Please check with district guidelines for further verification.



Activity 1: The Ancient Ones

Note: This activity would obviously work well in a class or unit focused on the early literature of Britain. If background information about this period and its literature has not already been provided by the course, the following lecture would be extremely helpful for students to understand the context in which the poem “The Ruin” occurs.

Lecture

Prereading

Prior to reading the poem “The Ruin,” explain to the students that the island of Britain was an attractive place for invasion. The original inhabitants, people who had ventured to the island during prehistoric times, were displaced by the Celts, who in their turn were taken over by the Roman Empire under Emperor Claudius in 43 AD. Britain, with its relatively moderate climate and rich tin resources, proved a tempting prize for Rome. Throughout the period of Roman occupation of the island, a rich cultural mix of the Imperial occupiers and the original culture sprang up, and Roman roadways, baths, buildings, structures, and walls came to occupy many of what still remain the major cities of Britain – including, of course, the city of Londinium (London), and the southern city of Bath.

For approximately the next four centuries Rome occupied the island, but the empire weakened as time progressed, and gradually Roman troops began to be recalled to the capital to defend it against the increasing might of the Huns, the Goths, the Visigoths, and other tribes who threatened Rome’s borders in Europe. In the year 410, Emperor Honorius replied to a request for more troops by saying that the Romano-Britons were effectively on their own. Following that point, Roman cultural influence in Britain sharply declined.

However, whenever there is a power vacuum, someone is always happy to fill it. In this case, the “someones” were three Germanic tribes from Western Europe, the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes. Conflict over control of the island ensued, but by the early 600s, the invading Anglo-Saxons were victorious. Until the conquest of Angle-land (England) by the Normans in 1066, Anglo-Saxon and Danish culture would continue to dominate.

The poem “The Ruin” is found in the *Exeter Book*, an anthology of Anglo-Saxon poetry compiled in the tenth century – the largest collection of Old English literature extant. The book’s collection is wonderfully diverse, with riddles, elegies, and other poems providing a wealth of insight into this culture and its poetic style and traditions.



Reflection

Students should be asked to reflect individually on the following questions before sharing answers with others in a small group.

1. If possible, visit the following website:

<http://www.romanbaths.co.uk/>

This website, featuring the Roman ruins in the city of Bath, England is particularly informative, with beautifully vivid slide shows detailing the city's architecture, engineering, and rich history.

2. Imagine that you are an Anglo-Saxon invader. Most of your buildings are constructed from wattle and daub (stick frame for mud walls). By contrast, the Roman structures tended to be built of concrete, tile, and stone; many of their buildings, walls, aqueducts, and baths required advanced skills in architecture and engineering to construct. If you came upon Bath as an Anglo-Saxon invader, what assumptions would you make about the makers of this place? How would you regard them?

Individual Reflection - Prereading

Students should be given the translations of "The Ruin" below and be instructed to fold the copy down the middle, looking at Translation #1 first and Translation #2 second, and then finally both of them together, comparing one version with another. As they read both poems, please have them annotate the handouts by making note of the following:

Prereading Questions – "The Ruin"

1. Anglo-Saxon poetry made heavy use of *alliteration* – that is, repeated sounds at the beginning of a series of words in a line or lines of poetry, as in the classic "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." **Note at least five moments in each poems where you see alliteration.**

2. Anglo-Saxon poetry also made extensive use of compound nouns known as *kennings*. Kennings were used to describe objects in a riddling, metaphoric way, such as "whale-road" for "sea," or "ring-giver" for "king." **Where do you see**



kennings or possible kennings in the translated poems?

3. What is the author’s attitude toward the builders of this place? What is your evidence for this belief?

4. What moment or image in each poem did you find the most effective at conveying the sense of this ruined place and the author’s attitude about the builders of it? Why did you find this moment the most effective?

Note: You do not have to pick the same image from both poems. Treat them as if they were independent works.

“The Ruin”

| Translation #1 | Translation #2 |
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| <p>Splendid this rampart is, though fate destroyed it, The city buildings fell apart, the works Of giants crumble. Tumbled are the towers, Ruined the roofs, and broken the barred gate, Frost in the plaster, all the ceilings gape, Torn and collapsed and eaten up by age. And grit holds in its grip, the hard embrace Of earth, the dead departed master-builders, Until a hundred generations now Of people have passed by.</p> <p>The heart inspired, incited to swift action. Resolute masons, skilled in rounded building Wondrously linked the framework with iron bonds. The public halls were bright, with lofty gables,</p> | <p>Well-wrought this wall: Weirds broke it. The stronghold burst... Snapped rooftrees, towers fallen, the work of the Giants, the stonemiths, mouldereth. Rime scoureth gatetowers rime on mortar. Shattered the showershields, roofs ruined, age under-ate them. And the wielders and wrights? Earthgrip holds them – gone, long gone fast in gravesgrasp while fifty fathers and sons have passed. Mood-quicken mind, and man of wit, cunning in rings, bound bravely the wallbase with iron, a wonder. Bright were the buildings, halls where springs ran, high, horngabled, much throng-noise; these many meadhalls men filled</p> |



| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Bath-houses many; great the cheerful noise, And many mead-halls filled with human pleasures, Till mighty fate brought change upon it all.</p> <p>Slaughter was widespread, pestilence was rife, And death took all those valiant men away. The martial halls became deserted places, The city crumbled, its repairers fell, Its armies to the earth. And so these halls Are empty... where long since A host of heroes, glorious, gold-adorned, Gleaming in splendor, proud and flushed with wine, Shone in their armor, gazed on gems and treasure, On silver, riches, wealth and jewelry, On this bright city with its wide domains.</p> <p>Stone buildings stood, and the hot stream cast forth Wide sprays of water, which a wall enclosed In its bright compass, where convenient Stood hot baths ready for them at the centre. Hot streams poured forth over the clear grey stone, To the round pool and down into the baths.</p> <p>Hamer, Richard Frederick Sanger. "The Ruin." <i>A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse</i>. London: Faber, 1970. 25-27.</p> | <p>with loud cheerfulness: Weird changed that.</p> <p>Came days of pestilence, on all sides men fell dead, death fetched off the flower of the people; where they stood to fight, waste places and on the acropolis, ruins. Hosts who would build again shrank to the earth. There once many a man mood-glad, gold-bright, of gleams garnished, flushed with wine-pride, flashing war-gear, gazed on wrought gemstones, on gold, on silver, on wealth held and hoarded, on light-filled amber, on this bright burg of broad dominion.</p> <p>Stood stone houses; wide streams welled hot from source, and a wall all caught in its bright bosom, and the baths were hot at hall's hearth; that was fitting... Thence hot streams, loosed, ran over hoar stone unto the ring-tank... ...It is a kingly thing ...city..."</p> <p>Alexander, Michael. "The Ruin." <i>The Earliest English Poems</i>. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966. 31-32</p> |
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Individual Reflection – Postreading

When students have had ample opportunity to read the two poems, noting alliteration, kennings, the author’s tone, and any other striking images, encourage them to answer the following questions briefly in writing before pairing with others for group discussion.

1. Question 4 above asked you, “What moment or image in each poem did you find the most effective at conveying the sense of this ruined place and the author’s attitude about the builders of it?” **Did you choose the same image or moment from both poems?**

1a. If you chose different images or moments, **why was this moment more effectively translated in one version rather than in the other?** What quality was there about the words or images that more effectively communicated the power of that moment than the other poem did?

1b. If you chose the same moment, **what quality was there about the words or images in *both* translations that most effectively communicated the power of this moment?**

2. Which one did you prefer? Why?

3. Which one “feels” more genuinely Anglo-Saxon? Why?

4. Which one most effectively communicated a sense of the people and place? Why?

5. **Did the author’s tone or attitude toward his subject seem to stay the same in both works, or did it seem different in Translation #1 than in Translation #2?** Explain.

6. Which version most effectively used alliteration? Cite your favorite example and explain why you felt it was particularly effective.

7. Which version most effectively used kennings? Cite your favorite example and explain why you felt it was particularly effective.



Pair/Small Group Discussion

A Brief Note About Small-Group Discussion

Even though the whole-class discussion would just seem to rehash the small-group discussion, the small-group discussion is crucial. Especially for more reticent students, the opportunity to “test-drive” their initial impressions with their peers and compare impressions of the text before taking the larger risk of sharing in front of the whole class can be invaluable.

Small-group discussion also helps negate or eliminate those “Mount Rushmore moments” in which the teacher asks a question about the text, and the class looks back at her with apparently uncomprehending blankness. A helpful response here is often, “Okay, talk about this amongst yourselves for the next few minutes, and then we’ll reconvene as a class and see what you think.” This decision buys students time and allows them to compose fruitful answers – and allows them to understand that in textual interpretation, the onus has to be on them to be active, engaged readers in conversation with the text.

Students should be given the chance to “compare notes” about the two translations, debating about which translation is most effective, most moving, most apt in its use of language and images. Obviously, opinions will vary, but students should be encouraged to ask their peers to justify or develop their answers with evidence from the text. A simple “It’s my opinion,” or “I just think so” is not particularly helpful for discussion.

Whole-Class Discussion

A Brief Note About Whole-Class Discussion

The role of the teacher in class discussion is primarily to keep students *focused on the words*. In discussion, require students to explain what element or elements within the words led them to their conclusion. Four questions are absolutely essential to ask students during discussion – and to encourage students to ask of themselves and each other.

| | |
|---------------|---|
| WHY? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Why do you think so? •Why does your line/your word/your evidence prove your point? •Why did the author use this particular word and not another, similar word? |
| WHERE? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Where in the story/play/poem did you find your information? •Can you literally put your finger on the place in the text that proves your point? |
| WHAT? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •What do you mean when you say "____"? •What does this quote you chose mean? Can you rephrase it? •What else could the author have said here? •What "work" is this word doing that a similar one would not do? |

For some teachers, this role may represent a change from the usual classroom discussion. **The goal of the teacher is not to lead the students to a predetermined insight, but to communicate the crucial idea that although there may not be one "right answer," there are better and worse ones – and the better ones *are* better because they are supported by the words of the author.**

Start With Facts

Students should first note alliteration and kennings as a factual “warm-up” to the larger discussion. Noting the use of literary devices should not take the bulk of the time, of course, but looking at the “tools of the trade” the translators chose to employ is helpful, particularly if the conversation turns from *what*

they did to why they did it – and most of all, whether the translator’s choice effectively conveyed the author’s message.

They Must Be Giants

Focus should then turn toward the author’s attitude toward the “giants” in Translation #1, with the teacher guiding students to substantiate their reasoning: What word or words would they use to describe the author’s attitude toward the ancient builders of this place?



NOTE: It is usually more effective to discuss tone in a two-term fashion. That is, rather than merely describing a tone as *optimistic*, it helps to modify that word with a different (but complementary) tone, as in the expression *cautiously optimistic*.

Continue to work through the questions as a whole class, focusing students (as needed) on the two poems. Ultimately, which translation did the students find more effective at conveying the sense of “The Ruin”? Why?

Closure

Review the major insights the students provided from the two poems. Some of the students’ reactions will depend on personal taste and their feeling for the poem’s effectiveness at conveying tone and mood and subject, but continually focus comments on the words of the text.

Assessment

This assignment can be assessed in a variety of ways -- obviously through class discussion and participation points, but also through brief writing in which students compare two specific passages from each translation.

Prompt: Compare these two passages from “The Ruin.” Calling attention to each translator’s use of specific words, images, syntax, and tone, discuss which of the two translations you find the most effective and why.

Passage 1

*And grit holds in its grip, the hard embrace
Of earth, the dead departed master-builders,
Until a hundred generations now
Of people have passed by.*

Passage 2

*Earthgrip holds them – gone, long gone
fast in gravesgrasp while fifty fathers
and sons have passed.*



Prompt 2

If you speak another language -- ideally as a native of that tongue -- you will appreciate the difficult dance of translation. Find a brief poem of solid literary value in your language and translate it into English, trying to keep as much of the poet's images, implications, and figurative language as you can while keeping true to the spirit of the poem.