

## **Introduction to Islam in the ELA Classroom**

*James R. Wilks*

### **Introduction**

The vast majority of literature offered in ELA classrooms is of a distinctly western bent. Though there has been an increased effort to include works that represent a more multicultural perspective, this perspective remains firmly entrenched in a Western ethos. While those authors traditionally considered great and thus part of the canon of Western literature, such as Homer, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Faulkner, Hawthorne, Melville, Conrad, Fitzgerald, Hemmingway, are still represented, others have been added. We have added the feminine perspective with the likes of Plath, Shelley, Bronte, Salinger, and Austen. As minorities have gained their due rights, so have their perspectives been added to the canon and the curriculum, and so Hansberry, Hughes, Garcia Marquez, and Angelou greet our students in middle and high school.

The vast majority of these works, despite the unique visions and perspectives they bring to the ELA classroom, still hail from the Western world. How many famous pieces of Japanese or Chinese literature find their way into the ELA classroom? Despite the fact that Hinduism is the world's third largest religion after Christianity and Islam and boasts about one billion followers, how many American high school students could name a single Hindu sacred text? How many pieces of African literature or folklore show up on a typical ELA curriculum? In many ways, it is logical for literature taught in Western schools to be of Western origin. After all, the majority of allusions made to literature in media and more modern works that students will encounter are Western in origin, and many of these works are the foundation of governmental, philosophical, and political ideologies that dominate Western society. These are good reasons to focus primarily on Western literature in the ELA classroom, but there are benefits to avoiding a focus exclusively upon it.

There are many cultures that influence Western, and indeed American culture in a variety of ways. Whether America leads the world is a matter of debate, but it is without question that America interacts with much of the world, and interaction is nearly always a two way street. China is teaching its youth to speak English, as is India. Japan is one of the U.S.'s largest trading partners. The Middle East has had a massive influence on U.S. politics and policy decisions, most especially in the past ten years. And yet, there has been very little done to integrate Middle Eastern literature into the ELA curriculum. Middletown High school, where I work, has adopted *The Kite Runner* by Hosseini as part of the tenth grade curriculum, but this work is emblematic of many of the efforts to

introduce multicultural literature into the U.S. ELA classroom. It is a book written originally in English by an author who, though Afghani by birth, has lived in the U.S. since he was 15. It does nicely to bridge the gap between Afghanistan and the U.S., but it hardly qualifies as a canonical text from the Middle East, and in fact the film adaptation of it has been banned in Afghanistan by Afghanistan's Ministry of Culture.

This unit is representative of a larger need for ELA classrooms to feature literature from around the world. If we are to understand other cultures, non-Western cultures, then it is incumbent upon us as teachers to immerse ourselves in the literature of these cultures. Literature, it hardly need be said, can represent the history, pathos, society, mythology, and other aspects of a civilization. A story can capture a people like nothing else. Therefore, in the interest of increasing Western knowledge of the Middle East, this unit is presented as an introduction to that most focused-upon part of the world through an examination of the literature, history, and dominant religion, Islam. Like many places in the world, the Middle East is hardly homogeneous, and even a semester long curriculum would be hard pressed to do justice to the literature of one of the myriad of societies and bodies of literature that is encapsulated by the moniker Middle East. Even so, wading in the shallow end provides more exposure to swimming than ignoring that a pool exists in the first place.

### **Objectives**

To provide exposure to Middle Eastern and Islamic literature. Not all literature will necessarily be Islamic in origin or theme, but it must be examined in such a light, as the literature itself is being read in predominantly Muslim countries.

### **Rationale**

As an ELA teacher at Middletown high school for the past seven years, I have taught a multitude of students and different classes. Though I have taught ninth through twelfth grade, and thus this curriculum document will have an eye towards the breadth of students found in a high school classroom, I teach primarily twelfth grade, and as such, this curriculum is primarily designed to be applied to a similar group. While I teach the occasional Honors section, the majority of the classes I teach in a given year are twelfth grade College Prep, which is the standard, or lowest, ELA available to twelfth grade students.

Middletown high school is in a suburban area of Delaware consisting mostly of farmland. The majority of students are middle class, and minority numbers are generally low. If I have had a Muslim students in my seven years at Middletown high, I did not know it. In Multicultural Literature and Classical Literature, I have taught the Ramayana, and I learned from those experiences that almost none of my students have had any exposure to the Hindu religion or literature. Though many are well read and interested in topical information, few have had exposure to other cultures and religions, and as such,

this curriculum unit can perform the important function of expanding their knowledge of Muslim belief, history, and literature.

## **Background**

### Muslim History

According to Muslims, the history of their people begins not with Muhammad, but with Ishmael. In the Old Testament, Abraham was asked to sacrifice his first born son, Isaac. Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah, his wife. However, before Isaac was born, Abraham had a son with Hagar, his second wife allowed by Sarah so that Abraham might conceive a child. The result of this is that while Jews, who believe they are descended from Isaac, hold that Isaac was Abraham's true heir and that it was he that was to be sacrificed to God, Arabs hold that Ishmael was Abraham's first son through lineage, and that the bible is mistaken when it claims that Isaac was to be sacrificed. Thus the claim by Arabs that the Jews wrote Ishmael out of his rightful place, relegating the Arabs to a patrilineal second place. After their exile, Hagar and Ishmael wandered searching for water. This search is echoed in one of the Hajj rituals, detailed below. In frustration, Ishmael kicked the sand, and God, hearing their prayers, caused water to spring forth. This became the well of Zam Zam, the foundation of Mecca, and a holy place to Muslims. Zam Zam provides water still today.

When Muhammad was born, Arabia was much as Greece was a thousand years earlier: a loosely confederated group of tribes that sometimes allied for common defense and sometimes battled one another. The Meccan culture was dominant, and this was partly because of Mecca's key placement on the all-important camel caravan route. Mecca also contained the well, Zam Zam, as well as the Ka'ba, a cube-like structure that housed various statues of pagan deities. Though the Ka'ba has been destroyed and rebuilt many times over the years, it remains one of the holiest places in the world to Muslims.

Muhammad began as a lowly servant on the camel caravan. He was, according to Muslim tradition, illiterate. This is an important point, as one of the reasons the Koran is believed to be divine is the quality of its writing; thus, the more illiterate Muhammad was, the more divine the Koran must necessarily be. It is the equivalent of a second grader speaking in Shakespearean dialogue. Muhammad received his first revelation from the Archangel Gabriel at Mt. Hira in 610 CE at the age of forty. The Koran is a collection of the passages spoken by Muhammad over the following twenty two years. When these revelations overcame him and he began to speak from the book of God, those around him would record whatever he said. Later, these writings were assembled into the Koran by the third Caliph.

Muhammad first wife, Khadija, was fifteen years older and quite a bit richer than Muhammad when they married, and a widow. When Muhammad received his first

revelation, Khadija was the first to learn of it and to believe; she is therefore the first Muslim. She certainly was not the last, but Muhammad faced an uphill battle to convince his fellow Arabs that he spoke the words of God. Though he gained supporters in Mecca, he had to flee the city to Yathrib, which is now called Medina. Medina remained Muhammad's home for the next eight years until, triumphant, he returned to Mecca in 630 CE. During this interim time, Muhammad and his people fought many battles, and indeed the Koran has much to say on the matter of battle. After Khadija's death, Muhammad took several wives, some for political reasons. One of the claims sometimes trumpeted by Western critics of Islam is that one of Muhammad's wives was nine, and thus that he was a pedophile. Aslan holds that Aisha was betrothed to Muhammad when she was nine, but that the marriage and thus the consummation did not happen until several years later. Though there seems to be some debate on this, specifically as to how old Aisha was when she married Muhammad, it is worth noting that marriage at twelve or thirteen was hardly unusual in colonial America as well<sup>1</sup>.

After the death of Muhammad, the unity among Muslims ended. Aisha's father, Abu Bakr, became leader, or Caliph, of the tribe. His reign did not last long, however, as he died two years later. This is the source of the split between the Sunni Muslims and the Shi'a Muslims. Sunnis hold that, having been chosen by the community, Abu Bakr was the rightful Caliph. Shi'a, on the other hand, maintain that Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin, as the heir of Muhammad, was the rightful ruler. Indeed, Ali was the fourth Caliph to rule after Muhammad, and according to the Shi'a, the first legitimate one. To the Shi'a, he is the first Imam, a position roughly equivalent to a priest or minister, though the details of the position vary depending on the version of Islam. The debate between the Sunnis and Shi'a is a religious and philosophical one. Essentially, the Sunnis believe that Muslims have the right to choose their leaders from among the people, while the Shi'a hold that only God can appoint leaders and, having chosen Muhammad, it is the descendents of Muhammad that God has chosen to lead.

#### Tenets and beliefs

Perhaps the most important thing for students to understand is that Islam is not a wholly separate religion from Christianity and Judaism, but is in many ways an expansion upon them. Muslims consider Christians and Jews to be people of the book, and indeed the God of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Koran are all the same God. It is a misnomer to call the Muslim God "Allah," as "Allah" is simply Arabic for "God." The Muslims believe that the God has had three highest prophets through the years. The first of these was Moses, as described in the Old Testament. The second of these was Jesus Christ, similarly described in the New Testament. The third and final of these prophets

---

<sup>1</sup> Aslan, Reza. *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. New York: Random House Paperbacks, 2006.

was Muhammad, who lived from 570-632 CE. Abraham is sometimes counted among these, raising the number to four. None of these prophets, despite the basic tenet of Christianity that claims the contrary, are God-incarnate to the Muslims. As addressed below under the five tenets of Islam, there is no God but God, and God is therefore whole, singular, and completely different from everything else. It is impossible, from a Muslim point of view, for a human to be divine, though they may be divinely inspired.

Despite this, Muslims tend to consider Christians and Jews not as heathens, but simply as misguided, as not fully up to date, as it were. The commonly held belief is that there is an ideal book in heaven, one that either was written by God or else has existed as long as God has, and that the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Koran are all attempts by God to give this Mother of all Books, in part or in whole, to the human race. The word attempt here requires clarification: it is not God's failing but ours that the transfer of this information has been corrupted. The Muslims believe that the Jews and Christians both failed to allow this book to be transmitted accurately to mankind, allowing it to become corrupted through time and human failing. The Koran, therefore, has remained unchanged since Uthman's "collection and canonization of the Quran"<sup>2</sup> his reign from 644-656. As the Koran is the direct word of God, as written down by those who heard it directly from Muhammad's mouth during his lifetime, it ceases to be the Koran if it is translated or altered in any way. Muslims consider the Koran mankind's third and final chance to adhere to the direct word of God, and believe therefore in order to hear or read the word of God, one must do so in Arabic. This is not to indicate that God is Arabic or prefers the Arabic language per se, only that the Book was transferred to a prophet, Muhammad, who spoke Arabic. One of the proofs pointed to by Muslims as to the veracity of the Koran, one claimed several times by Muhammad himself within the Koran, is that the writing of the book is of such a quality that it could not be produced by a human. Comparable to the best literature of any language, for example Shakespeare or Chaucer in English, the verses of the Koran are of surpassing beauty in the original Arabic. Unfortunately, this quality is lost in translation, and thus a non-Arabic reader who reads the Koran in another language is not exposed to one of the key qualities of the work that Muslims believe proves its divine origin. Indeed, to read the Koran in another language is not to read the Koran, but a translation of it.

There are, broadly speaking, five central tenets or "pillars" of Islam. These are, in no particular order: the pledge, prayer, Zakat, fasting, and Hajj.

The pledge is the most simple of these, at least to explain and accomplish, but its implications are vast; it is the only of the five pillars to require belief instead of action. The pledge is "there is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet." These eleven words can serve to set a prospective Muslim on the path to faith. The central concept inherent in these words is a monotheistic one. God is indivisible and wholly other from anything and everything else. It is considered somewhere between improper and highly

---

<sup>2</sup> Aslan, *No god but God*, 125

blasphemous to create an image of God, and even images of humans are a touchy subject, as man was made in God's image. This iconoclastic attitude has affected Muslim art and architecture greatly, and though those mediums are beyond the scope of this curriculum, it is nevertheless an interesting subject. Mosques, for example, do not feature the depictions of scenes from the bible common to Christian churches, instead featuring decorative, symmetrical designs that are somewhat mathematical in nature. Despite the fact that the Koran often speaks in the plural (there are many theories as to why this is), this singularity of God is central to the Islamic belief. Jews and Christians, as monotheists and followers of the same God, are looked upon by the majority of Muslims as wayward siblings, and in many denominations of Islam marriage with them is permissible. This does not extend to polytheists, however, such as Hindus and pagans. To most Muslims, these are the infidels of which the Koran speaks, and there is no salvation waiting for them after death.

The second part of this pledge, while perhaps not as important as the first, nevertheless is key. Stating that God is God essentially is a statement of monotheism. Stating that Muhammad is his prophet is what separates Muslims from all other monotheistic faiths. By acknowledging the prophetic status of Muhammad, one must therefore acknowledge the Koran and the belief that it is the word of God. This is an important distinction between the Koran and the Old and New Testaments. Though many hold that the bible is to be taken literally, many also hold that the stories told in it, especially the Old Testament, are parables. Many claim that demons, for example, are symbolic of the darker parts of human nature, and so on. There is no equivocating about this in Islam; the Koran is the word of God given to mankind through Muhammad, his prophet.

The second pillar of Islam, one of the better known by Western society if for no other reason than it is so visible, is prayer, or Salat. Muslims must pray, and they must do so at particular times and they must do it aloud. The times given are morning, , afternoon, later afternoon, evening, and before bed. The Koran states that if a believer must miss prayer, than that is acceptable for good reason (i.e. while travelling, while sick), but that a reasonable effort must be made. The common image of this in Western society is a Muslim kneeling on a prayer rug facing east, bending over to touch his head to the ground. In fact, the prayer may be done standing, and the direction is only east if one is west of the Ka'ba, which one should face when praying. Ritual ablution and dress is dictated when possible. This prayer is liturgical in nature; Muslims pray by reciting lines from the Koran in Arabic. They do not ask God for things during Salat, though they may ask at other times. The purpose of this prayer is not to obtain anything from God, but as an act of submission to God. In fact, the word "Islam" means to submit, and a "Muslim" is one who submits to God. The prayer acts as a symbolic act to God and others as well as reminder to oneself of one's submission.

Zakat, probably the least well known in Western society and perhaps the pillar most helpful to combat the demonization of Islam in that society, is essentially a tax for charity. The standard Zakat is 10%, and though it often takes the form of a monetary donation, it need not be such. One might instead volunteer ten percent of their time to charity, to the poor. The Koran is adamant about taking care of widows and orphans, and Zakat is a part of that. In addition to aiding those in need, Zakat serves a beneficial purpose for the Muslim making the donation. In the Old Testament, wealth is a reward from God for serving. In the New Testament, Jesus encouraged followers to give up their wealth. For Muslims, wealth, like many things, is a test from God. Wealth is material and therefore ultimately temporary. To cling to one's wealth in violation of the command of God is to place emphasis on the corporeal and not the eternal. Zakat is another way to be a good Muslim; that is, it is another way to demonstrate one's submission to God.

The fourth pillar of Islam, fasting, is performed during the holy month of Ramadan. Ramadan is the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, and due to differences between the Muslim and Western calendars, Ramadan moves slightly each year. Ramadan takes place over the course of a lunar month, and during this time, Muslims are to abstain from eating, drinking, and sexual activity during the daytime. Once the sun sets, these human desires may be indulged. There is no set time for this, and Muslims may experience shorter or longer fasting times depending on the time of year or where they live. The holy significance of Ramadan is that it commemorates and honors the first revelation of God to the prophet Muhammad in 610 CE. Its purpose, like so many Islamic traditions, is to test the faithful's patience, humility, and subservience to God. Eid Al-Fitr, or just Eid, is one of the biggest holidays in the Muslim calendar. It is the first day of the month following Ramadan, and is normally celebrated with food, Zakat, and prayer. As with the ritual prayer, the Koran makes exceptions for Muslims who are unable to fast due to sickness or other reasons. One should, the Koran says, try as best one can. The practice of following the rules of Islam in practice but not in meaning and good faith is called "shirk."

The last of the five pillars of Islam, and perhaps the most famous, is Hajj. This is the pilgrimage that all Muslims must make, assuming they are able, to Mecca. Those who are unable to go themselves due to illness or age may make a symbolic journey by financing another Muslim's Hajj, assuming they are capable. Muslims must make this journey when they are of age to be an adult (usually 12 or 13); going when younger does not count; the Muslim is not yet capable of understanding the journey and its meaning. Muslims don sacred apparel to enter the Grand Mosque, the beginning of the ritual. After circumambulating the Ka'ba seven times, a process completed with thousands of other Muslims, they perform other symbolic rituals. They run back and forth between Safah and Marwah, the twin hills. This commemorates the search for water by Hagar. Mount Arafat is visited, believed home of Adam and Eve after their exile from paradise. Stones

are thrown at the three pillars at Mina, representing the devil. The journey ends with the sacrifice of an animal whose meat is distributed to the poor.

Astute readers of the Koran may notice that there are times when the book appears to contradict itself. The Muslim answer to this is Abrogation: the most recent ruling supersedes all previously made and apparently contradicting rulings. An example of this is the matter of Muslims and alcohol. At one point in the Koran, Muhammad states that Muslims should control their drinking. Later on, Muhammad states that Muslims should abstain from alcohol altogether. This has been explained as God bringing about changes in the followers of Muhammad gradually, in this case weaning from the alcohol that was a common staple of their lives at the time. It is therefore important to read the chapters of the Koran in the order they were dictated and scribed, at least if one wants a complete picture of Islamic belief.

There are two types of actions in Islam. The first of these have to do with worship and pertain specifically to God and the worship of him. The second of these have to do with the common affairs of mankind. Muslims tend to divide all actions into these two camps. Similarly, there are two sources of precedent when deciding Muslim law. The first, most obvious, and most weighty of these is the Koran itself. If the Koran is clear regarding a specific matter of law, Abrogation considered, then there is little to discuss. On religious matters where the Koran is not clear or does not address a particular subject, then Muslim scholars and law-makers look to Hadith, which are the books of report. The Hadith is a listing purported to relate the things that Muhammad said and did during his life, and it is often used to settle matters of Muslim law by scholars and Imams.

## Modern Islam

An evaluation of the modern state of Islam is beyond the purview of this document. Like any major religion, there are different sects of Islam and different beliefs held by differing followers, and to categorize them all would take book, if not several. There are, however, some broad things that can be said about the fastest growing religion in the world.

About 85% of Muslims are Sunni Muslims, while roughly 15% are Shi'a. The Sunnis claim no central authority figure like the Catholic Pope, while the Shi'a believe that the descendents of Muhammad should lead the faithful.

While Islam is most dominant in the Middle East and portions of Africa and Asia, Muslims are found all over the world. According to pewforum.org (2009), there are over 1.5 billion Muslims in the world, making up nearly a quarter of the world's population.

## The Koran

After setting the stage for the class with background information on the religion of Islam and its history, the students should get direct exposure to the text of the Koran.



Students should read and discuss a key chapter or chapters from the Koran.

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Near the end of his life, Malcolm X, who changed his last name from Little to X to symbolize the lost tribal name he could never learn, went on Hajj to Mecca to learn more about the religion that he thought he had followed since he was in prison. His experiences were enlightening to him, and they serve as an excellent transition piece of literature for students. Because the religion of Islam is so unfamiliar to most Western students, this portion of the curriculum is designed to allow them to learn about the Hajj, Mecca, Islam, and the people who comprise these through the first person account of someone whose life was transformed on their journey.

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, dictated to Alex Haley shortly before he died, gives the first person account of a man whose life underwent many changes. After an impoverished beginning, X went to live in Boston and then New York City. He details his immersion in the night life of both cities, one that led to women, drugs, and finally burglary. After his arrest and imprisonment, X was approached by family members who had recently converted to a version of Islam espoused by the prophet Elija Muhammad. Though small to start, this group greatly interested Malcolm X, who quickly became an ardent supporter. This transformation was dramatic, as he had previously been of such a godless and evil temperament that his fellow prisoners had nicknamed him Satan. X worked tirelessly to improve his reading and writing skills and his penmanship. He read up to fifteen hours a day in prison, and unsurprisingly wore glasses to correct an astigmatism upon being released after seven years.

X immediately set about spreading the word of Elija Muhammad, and over the next twelve years, the group spread to nearly every major city in the US. Called the Nation of Islam, they gained international and media attention. As Elija Muhammad's health deteriorated, Malcolm X became the chief speaker of the group, and he details a life of public appearances and travel in his autobiography. Also called Black Muslims, the Nation of Islam advocated a more militant resistance to white authority that stood in contrast to the peaceful resistance forwarded by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The Nation of Islam's belief system about the origin of race and humanity, as detailed by X in the book, also differs from traditional Islam.

In 1964, Malcolm X went on Hajj to learn more about the religion of Islam. His experience transformed his views significantly, and when he returned, he began preaching a more tolerant, race-inclusive version of Islam. This was in stark contrast to his previous claims and beliefs that white people are "devils" designed to subjugate and cause suffering among other races. At one point before his journey, a white female student asked Malcolm X what she could do to right her perceived wrongs of her race. As she was white, X told her that there was nothing she could do. After his journey, he lamented this moment and similar ones, stating not that white people are devils born, but

that American culture tends to make them into devils. In the final pages of his autobiography, X states that he knows that the Nation of Islam, whom he had split with, was making efforts to kill him. He was shot to death less than a year after his return from Mecca.

### *The Arabian Nights Tales of 1001 Nights Volume 1*

Students will read the Introduction to and Nights 1, 2, and 3 of *The Arabian Nights Tales of 1001 Nights Volume 1*. Information regarding these passages can be found below, beginning in Day 5 of the Strategies section.

## **Strategies**

What follows is a plan for a 9 day lesson based on block classes of an hour and a half in length. This can of course be modified, shortened, added to, or otherwise broken up to make it accommodate different schedules and class lengths.

### Day 1: Introduction to Islam –What do you know?

The purpose of this lesson is to discern what the students know, or think they know, about Islam. This could vary greatly depending on the age and makeup of the classroom, but if it is an American classroom, there are likely some questions and misconceptions, as well as a lack of overall knowledge.

Suggested activities: Instructor may open with a normal activating strategy, such as vocabulary, grammar sentence correction, review of the previous class period, etc. Students should then take out a piece of paper and spend 10 minutes answering the following question: “What is Islam?” Students should write everything they know, or think they know, about the religion. This may result in papers that range from a sentence to a page in length. Once this writing is complete, the students should gather in teacher-determined pairs or groups to share what they know about Islam, so as to learn from each other. This should take no more than five minutes. Once the groups are done sharing, they should, on one of the papers from the students, develop three questions that they have about Islam. These may be general questions, questions that arise from differences in their responses to their initial writing assignment, or simply things they’ve always wanted to know. This question development should take no more than an additional five minutes.

Once the questions have been developed, it is time to move on to the. As this portion of the lesson is student driven, it is not particularly structured. The purpose of this is myth busting. Students will likely ask a variety of questions based on popular American media and perception, and the instructor should be prepared with enough knowledge of Islam to answer questions. The instructor can either call on groups individually or ask for volunteers. The instructor should also be prepared for questions that he or she cannot answer. These can be set aside to be researched by the instructor, the students, or both. All papers can be turned into the instructor for process points.

Depending on time, the instructor may have the students write down one thing they've learned about Islam that they did not know as a summarizing activity, door pass, etc.

Assigned homework: The Cow, Sura 2 from the Koran.

### Day 2: The 5 Pillars of Islam

Day two should be focused primarily on imparting knowledge of the basic tenets of Islam and some of the history of the religion, specifically information regarding Muhammad. See the Muslim History and Tenets and Beliefs section of this Curriculum Document for detailed information.

Suggested activities: As an activating strategy, the instructor may have students write one more questions they have after the previous lesson's discussion regarding Islam. These questions can be asked aloud for further discussion, or utilized as the instructor wishes.

The primary goal of this lesson is to ensure that the students have knowledge of who Muhammad was and what the five pillars of Islam are. This can be done in a variety of ways, but I favor lecture and note taking in a twelfth grade college prep or honors course. This is still the norm for colleges, and as such students should be familiar with obtaining information in this fashion. Alternatively, the instructor could provide guided notes, short readings, a video presentation, or a PowerPoint presentation. The instructor could also divide the class into five different groups, giving each a document on one of the pillars of Islam. Each group could spend ten to twenty minutes reading and developing a summary of their pillar, which would then be presented to the class as a whole. Whatever method is employed, it is key that the students learn the five pillars and the general outline of Muhammad's life and his relevance to the religion of Islam.

### Day 3: The Cow, Sura 2 from the Koran.

Sura 2 begins as nearly all Suras do, with the words *In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*. The words "this Book is not to be doubted" (2:1) establish a pattern that is followed throughout the Koran. It is one of many elements or concepts that are revisited time and again. Just as the Bible states that God "will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you" (Exodus 7:1), the Koran notes that in the case of unbelievers, "God has set a seal upon their hearts and ears" (2:5). This is an example of a debate that has raged throughout religious history: predestination versus free will. If God knows all and determines all, how can humans have free will? This is fertile ground for a discussion should the instructor wish to pursue it and should the class be mature enough and the climate receptive.

In 2:17, the Koran uses a simile, another common trope used throughout the book, and one we will see is also used in *The Arabian Nights*. 2:23 makes note of one of the claims to veracity made by the Koran, mentioned above, that those who claim that the Koran is not the word of God should "produce one chapter comparable to it" (2:23). The Cow goes on to revisit and retell portions of the Bible; this is emblematic of the concept that the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Koran are all derived from the same

book, the mother of all books. In many cases, the Koran uses Biblical stories to make points about God, believers, and unbelievers. In some cases, the Koran expands upon or provides new insight into these stories. After beginning with the Adam and the Garden of Eden (2:28), the Koran moves on to Exodus, referencing the journey out of Egypt for the “Children of Israel” (2:47). A few pages later, Abraham and Jacob are addressed. Any of these could be used as compare and contrast material with their original stories in the Bible.

One of the pillars of Islam, prayer and how it is to be conducted, is addressed in 2:144. Another of the pillars is addressed several lines later when it is stated that “your God is one God. There is no god but Him” (2:163). The Hajj is mentioned in 2:196. Like several passages of the Bible, most especially the Old Testament, parts of the Koran are dedicated to rules to be followed. Examples of this can be found in the Cow, wherein the Muslim rule against eating pork is noted: “He has forbidden you carrion, blood, and the flesh of swine” (2:173). Here, as with many other rules in the Koran, it stated that those who cannot conform to a law may break it. If one is starving, pork is acceptable. If one is travelling, missing prayer is allowed. 2:181 states that altering a will after the death of an individual is a crime. Though the concept of altering legal documents certainly would constitute a crime in most societies, this may seem a trifling matter to address in the first Sura of a holy book. This is another example of a possible discussion point. A variety of laws and statements in the Koran seem to address what we might consider random or minor issues. However, the historical context of the time must be taken into account. Succession, property, and the concept of wills was a matter of debate in the time of Muhammad. This approaches a debate that has plagued Muslim society for many a year: was the Koran written to address the needs of the people it was delivered to, the Arabs of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and thus it should be reinterpreted as times change? Or, having foreknowledge of the future, did God intend the Koran to be true as it is written for all times? This is an issue that crops up in more than one religion, and is another source for good debate should the instructor wish to pursue it. Similarly, the instructor may address whether religious verses are meant to be taken literally or as metaphors. 2:190 states that “righteousness does not consist of entering your dwellings from the back” and Muslims should “enter [their] dwellings by their doors and fear God, so that [they] may prosper” (2:190). Is this a literal rule, that Muslims should not enter their houses by the back door, or is it a metaphorical statement about sneaking about or walking proudly?

One of the most common attack points on Islam is that it is a violent religion. Unquestionably, Muhammad fought in battles and his armies killed people. The Koran has much to say on the subject. One strong example is in 2:291, where Muslims are commanded to “fight for the sake of God those that fight against you, but do not attack them first. God does not love aggressors” (2:291). This is rich discussion material when placed in the context of modern times and when addressing terrorism in the Middle East conducted by people claiming to be Muslim. Of further interest to this debate is the command to “fight against them until idolatry is no more and God’s religion reigns

supreme” (2:193). It is worth noting here that idolatry is the setting up of false gods. Christianity and Judaism do not qualify, as they worship the same God. Indeed, all three religions share a condemnation of animism. The Muslim view of women is addressed in 2:228 when the Koran says “men have a status above women” (2:228). When I brought this passage to the attention of Dr. Khan, he stated that it was a translation issue, and that a better way to interpret the passage in English would be that men have an obligation to take care of women, as men tend to be property owners and money makers. This begs questions of issues surrounding the translation of a work. Many pieces found in the English classroom are translations either from older versions of English, such as *Beowulf*, or other languages, such as *Le Morte d’Arthur*. How do the decisions made when translating a work affect examinations of diction by students?

There are several literary devices worth noting in the Koran. One is the use of the word *we*. At first, the assertion that “there is no God but God” would seem to countermand the use of the plural first person, but there are several explanations for this. In some cases, it may be that Muhammad is referring to himself and God. As it is stated that angels revealed the word of God to Muhammad, it could refer to the angels, or Muhammad and the angels as a group. Finally, and quite likely, it is the majestic pronoun, or the royal *we*. Another structural device used often in the Cow and the Koran as a whole is that of rhetorical questions, such as in 2:75. The Koran also frequently gives example conversations in the form of: When the unbelievers say *this*, in response say *this*, such as in 2:80. The concept of Abrogation, as discussed above, is addressed in 2:106, where the Koran states “If We abrogate a verse or cause it to be forgotten, We will replace it by a better one or one similar” (2:106)

Suggested activities: For instructors, the teaching of literature is a highly personal science. Every teacher has their own style, and this document will not presume to trump that, but will instead make suggestions on discussion points from the works. There are various points throughout Sura 2 that bear examination and discussion, as noted above. Though Sura 2 is not comprehensive, it touches on a variety of subjects and literary devices that are common throughout the rest of the book, and as such, it serves well as an introductory microcosm of whole book.

Reading due: The Cow, Sura 2 from the Koran

Day 4: Chapter 17 (Mecca) from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

Chapter 17 of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* presents a transformation in the life of one of America’s most famous African-American figures. The details of his life, as conveyed in his Autobiography, are listed above. Chapter 17 of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, entitled Mecca, serves as a good introduction to the Hajj and the Muslim people. The first person account of a man who is transformed by the experience is poignant and affecting.

Suggested activities: The chapter about Malcolm X’s Hajj is very much the story of a transformative experience. As such, the chapter provides an opportunity for students to

connect the literature to their personal experiences. Instructors may wish to give the students fifteen to twenty minutes to write about a transformative experience in their own lives. This could be a conversation, a vacation, a moment of realization, or another experience along those lines. The narratives constructed by the students could be rough drafts to be turned into a longer essay to be submitted to the instructor. They could develop them into presentations on places they've been, which would provide a multi-cultural experience for the classroom. Alternatively, students could simply share their experiences in pairs or groups.

This transition from the Koran to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* also presents an opportunity to examine the effects of point of view. Day two of this lesson plan addresses the Hajj as a religious rite, but this chapter presents it from the view of a single man. Students should discuss and comprehend the ways that point of view can affect a piece of literature.

Reading due: Chapter 17 (Mecca) from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Day 5: *The Arabian Nights*, Introduction and Night 1

In the introduction to the 2010 Penguin edition of *The Arabian Nights Tales of 1001 Nights Volume 1* Robert Irwin notes that “listening to stories in Arab society was regarded as less sinful after the day’s work was done” and therefore that the stories were known as “things of the evening or tales related in the night for amusement”<sup>3</sup>. One of the things that becomes apparent from reading the first few stories in *The Arabian Nights* is that storytelling was considered an art, something that could be traded for goods or even life.

The Introduction to *The Arabian Nights* serves to establish the framework in which all of the following tales are to come. Like the Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*, the unknown author of the introduction establishes a connection between the stories, and the importance of the storytelling to the characters. This presents an excellent opportunity to discuss narrative structure, specifically that of the frame tale, and a comparison to Chaucer or even *Heart of Darkness* by Conrad can be easily made, depending on the students’ prior knowledge. *The Arabian Nights* features multiple story levels, sometimes telling a story within a story within a story, which can be confusing to students, but also presents an opportunity to outline the timelines and characters of the stories, allowing the students to focus on the patterns of narrative.

The Introduction tells the tale two brothers, both kings over their own lands. The younger brother, Shah Zaman, is going to visit his younger brother when he decides to return to his palace briefly to get something her forgot. Upon returning, he sees his wife

---

<sup>3</sup> Lyons, Malcolm, trans. *The Arabian Nights Tales of 1001 Nights Vol. 1*. London: Penguin Books, 2008, xi.

being unfaithful, and he slays both his wife and her lover. When Shah Zaman goes on to visit his brother, Shahriyar, he discovers that his brother's wife is unfaithful as well. After bringing his brother's attention to this, the two decide to set out to try to find someone who has experienced the same pain they have. During their journeys, they meet a *jinni* who has a mortal wife. The wife, after compelling the two brothers to sleep with her by invoking fear of her sleeping *jinni* husband, explains to them that she has been unfaithful 570 times. The brothers, having met someone who was cuckolded worse than them, return to Shahriyar's kingdom and do away with the unfaithful wife. As a result of this infidelity, and perhaps as revenge upon women, Shahriyar wed a new woman every night, slept with her, then killed her. After three years of this, Shahriyar's vizier, running short of virgins for his king, is forced to hand over his daughter. The daughter, Shahrazad, is quite clever however, and after asking for the presence of her sister, Dunyazad, concocts a plan to stay alive. With Dunyazad's prompting, Shahrazad begins telling a story that she cannot complete before daybreak. Shahriyar, so intrigued to hear the rest of the story, agrees to let her live so that he might hear the rest of the story after the setting of the sun. In this manner, Shahrazad manages to prolong her life; each night she tells stories, and each morning, as the sun rises, she makes the king wait until the following night to hear the continuation or conclusion.

In Night 1, Shahrazad begins the story of a wealthy merchant who, while traveling, cast aside a date stone. Immediately an *ifrit* appeared, accused the merchant of killing his son with the stone, and stated that he would kill the merchant in revenge. The merchant, after convincing the *ifrit* to give him time to put his affairs in order and to say goodbye to his loved one, did so and returned to the meeting place on New Year's Day. While waiting for the *ifrit*, three men arrive in succession, the first with a gazelle, the second with two dogs, and the third with mule. The *ifrit* arrives, but before he can carry out his sentence upon the merchant, the first man asks if the *ifrit* will trade a third of the merchant's blood in exchange for the story of how he came to be leading a gazelle. The *ifrit* agrees, and the tale within a story within a story begins. The tale concerns his wife's transformation into the gazelle, and how it came to be, but before the story is done, Shahrazad must stop because the sun is rising. The king declares that he will not kill Shahrazad until he hears the rest of the story, and thus ends Night 1.

In addition to the structural frame, there are a variety of literary aspects at work in these readings. There is an interesting mix of cultural values. Though the stories are clearly set within a Muslim view of the world, as evidenced by the frequency with which the characters refer to or call upon God, the story also displays pagan characters as well. Before Muhammad converted the Arab tribes to Islam, the majority of them were pagan in nature, believing polytheistic pantheons of gods, demons, and other creatures. The *jinni* and *ifrit* are evidence of this, though both *jinni* and *ifrit* are part of Islam; Satan is considered a *jinn*. There are many connections to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, should the instructor wish to seize upon them. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a 14<sup>th</sup> Century tale of King Arthur's nephew, Gawain, and his quest to meet a magical green

knight who intends to kill him as part of a bargain made in the first part of the story. Gawain even arrives on New Year's Day. *Gawain* is overtly Christian, but the frequent references to trolls, dragons, elves, and magicians betray the Anglo-Saxon pagan origins of the story and the world in which it is set. Magic has been as classically mistrusted in Christianity as it has in Islam. If there is only one God and all power flows from Him, any magic that does not originate with Him must necessarily originate with the Enemy, and yet the two live fairly peaceably in *Gawain*. Just so with *The Arabian Nights*.

As noted above, the importance and value of storytelling is evidenced in these two chapters. Through deft storytelling, Shahrazad is able to effectively purchase more life for herself, and as we will see in nights 2 and 3, and as an astute reader will accurately predict, the old men with the animals are able to purchase the merchant's life from the *ifrit* through the quality of their storytelling. It is important to note that, while certainly some of the stories in *The Arabian Nights* feature men or women tricking magical creatures, the three men are not fooling the *ifrit*. He considers the stories fair trade for the merchant's life, and, by extension, the life of his son who the merchant inadvertently killed. It is also worth noting that Shahrazad shrewdly begins her diatribe of stories with one about a man whose life is purchased through storytelling, just as Shahrazad is buying time for herself.

Suggested activities: As ever, the teaching of literature is a matter of instructor's preference, but there are options here for in class assignments. Students can work to outline the story structure of the tales, grouping characters and events together. They can also work to find connections between the three levels of story presented here. Students can make cross-cultural connections by discussing the importance of storytelling in our own society. Though it may rarely buy lives, there are many people, authors, directors, song-writers, who make their living by selling their tales. Storytelling as entertainment goes back thousands of years in Western civilization, just as it does in Arabic civilization, and students can discuss in groups, with the instructor, or write individually about the purpose of storytelling. Answers may range from passing time, as the pilgrims claim to use them for in *The Canterbury Tales*, to education and enlightenment.

Reading due: Introduction and Night 1 of *The Arabian Nights*.

#### Day 6: *The Arabian Nights*, Night 2 and 3

Prompted by her sister, Shahrazad continues her tale on Night 2. After revealing how his wife was transformed into a gazelle by a young sorceress, the *ifrit* grants that the story is in fact worthy of a third of the merchant's blood. After the story is concluded, the second man with the dogs approaches and makes the same offer. Upon the agreement of the *ifrit*, the man tells of how the two dogs are his brothers. The brothers, despite being helped financially by the man on several occasions after making themselves destitute, throw the man and his newly wedded wife off a ship so as to keep his money. The wife, after revealing herself an *ifrita*, states that she will seek revenge upon the brothers. Despite the betrayal of his brothers, the man asks that they be spared. Instead of killing them, the



*ifrita* transforms them into dogs. The *ifrit* grants that the story is worthy of another third of the merchant's blood. The man with the mule approaches, makes the same arrangement as the other two men, and goes on to explain how his wife was transformed into a mule. Shahrazad again breaks off the tale after the third man's story, leaving the merchant's fate uncertain.

On Night 3, Shahrazad quickly and predictably finishes her story, telling of how the merchant was granted his life by the *ifrit* thanks to the three men. She is quick, however, to launch into a new story, that of the fisherman, declaring that the story of the merchant "is not more surprising than the tale of the fisherman"<sup>4</sup>. This story concerns a fisherman who, after casting his net three times into the water and gaining nothing of value, casts it a fourth and final time. Inexplicably, the man only casts his net four times each day. The fourth cast seems at first more fortunate when the fisherman turns up a bottle, but upon opening it, an *ifrit* emerges and relates how he has sworn to kill the man who frees him. The fisherman, after ruminating that men have been given wits by God so that they might overcome trials such as these, tells the *ifrit* that he does not believe that he could have ever fit in the tiny brass bottle that the fisherman caught in his net. Shahrazad breaks off her tale here, and this is as good a place to stop with *The Arabian Nights* as any. Clearly, any reading that ends on a break between nights will end in an unfinished story, but this tale is quite easily completed by the students. Should the instructor read on, they will find that after the *ifrit* is tricked back into the bottle and it is closed by the wily fisherman, the fisherman tells a story to the *ifrit*, and so the latticework of frame tales continues.

Suggested activities: The majority of discussion points and literary techniques at work in the Introduction and Night 1 continue to apply here. This is also an excellent opportunity to address cliffhangers as a storytelling tool. Though their use in *The Arabian Nights* may be for Shahrazad to extend her life one more night, they have many common applications as well. Students can work to cite examples from modern stories that make use of cliffhangers, from films, to books, to television shows. The power of the cliffhanger, of the uncertain ending that keeps audiences coming back or tuning in, is really part of the power of storytelling. It is the human need to know that gives a story its power.

Teachers might consider having students finish the tale of the fisherman as a predictive reading exercise. There is also the potential for a writing assignment; the instructor may ask students to write their own tale to add to *The Arabian Nights*, one that is representative of the stories told thus far and, perhaps most importantly, one that is grounded in the cultural and Islamic values thus far established in the unit.

Reading due: Night 2 and 3 of *The Arabian Nights*

---

<sup>4</sup> Lyons, trans. *The Arabian Nights*, 19.

Day 7: Chapter 10 (Satan) from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

This lesson lends itself towards discussion of the beliefs of the Nation of Islam as presented by Malcolm X, and a discussion of radical Islam and the differences between traditional (or real) Islam and splinter factions, such as the Taliban.

This chapter details the beliefs of Elija Muhammad as explained to X in prison. After the Earth and Moon separated, the only humans on the planet were black. There were different tribes of blacks, but one was “especially strong,” a tribe called Shabazz, and it was from them that the black slaves are descended. Among these tribes was born a man named Yacub. He was a scientist with a large head, and for preaching against the established order in the city of Mecca, he and his 59,999 followers were exiled. To get revenge upon Allah, who is called such by the Nation of Islam to differentiate Him from the Judeo-Christian God, Yacub set about creating an evil white race on the island where he was exiled. Though he died before he could complete his genetic mechanizations, his followers continued his work, and from their efforts were born all other races. After 200 years, the first brown people were created. From them, after another 200 years of manipulation, the red people were created. From them, the yellow, and finally the white. The whites returned to subjugate the blacks, but they were exiled, this time to the caves of Europe. Eventually they came to power and gained dominion over the earth, but that rule would last only six thousand years, and that time has now come.

Clearly, there are some major differences between the beliefs held by the Nation of Islam and traditional Islam. This is an excellent example of how religions can be transformed by their followers, and ideally this should lead to excellent classroom discussion (see activity below).

Suggested activities: The nature of these contrasting belief systems suggest a graphic organizer, either a T chart or a Venn Diagram. Either could serve to illustrate the differences and similarities between the Nation of Islam and traditional Islam. Alternatively, students could be broken into groups to search through the text and compile a list of five key differences between the two belief systems. Students will then report out to the class, each group providing a key difference as the teacher writes them on the board. Optionally, the teacher may collect the work from each group and provide a grade for accuracy and/or completion.

Reading due: Chapter 10 (Satan) from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

Day 8: Review and Q&A

This period should be devoted to reviewing the unit, the major texts, and in preparation from the test. This also works as a cushion to complete any previously unfinished lessons.

Suggested Activities: Most instructors have an established and preferred review method. Some play games, some lecture, others provide review packets. I am partial to student generated questions that are then put to the class. Only if other students are unable to furnish answers, or if a given answer requires elaboration, does I step in as the instructor.

### Day 9: Unit test

As this Curriculum Document is available to all online, placing a copy of a test as an attachment would be counterproductive. However, a recommended test structure is as follows:

20 multiple choice questions, ranging from level 1 to level 3.

Several short answer questions.

An extended response question. This could range from informational in nature (outline and define the five pillars of Islam) to a question asking students to apply their knowledge gained (e.g. given a morally confusing situation, how would the tenets and beliefs of Islam guide a follower to act or respond).

### **Bibliography**

Aslan, Reza. *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. New York: Random House Paperbacks, 2006.

Lyons, Malcolm, trans. *The Arabian Nights Tales of 1001 Nights Vol. 1*. London: Penguin Books, 2008.

X, Malcolm. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. London: Penguin Books, 1964.

Curriculum Unit  
Title

Introduction to Islam in the ELA Classroom

Author

James R Wilks

**KEY LEARNING, ENDURING UNDERSTANDING, ETC.**

There exists an enduring and inseparable connection between the religion, values, and literature of a culture.

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S) for the UNIT**

In what ways can examining the interaction of religion and literature provide insight into a culture?

**CONCEPT A**

The tenets of Islam

**CONCEPT B**

Literature in context

**CONCEPT C**

The power of non-fiction

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS A**

What are the five pillars of Islam?  
How is Islam connected to Christianity and Judaism?  
How do the common Western conceptions of Islam differ from the reality of Islam?

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS B**

How can literature reflect the values and religion of the culture that produces it?  
What can an examination of the literary techniques of a work tell us about the culture it represents?

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS C**

In what ways can non-fiction give insight into a culture than literature cannot provide?  
What insights can be gained by reading about an event from the first person perspective?

**VOCABULARY A**

Muslim, Islam, Hajj, Zakat, pledge, fasting, Eid, Koran, Ka'ba, Salat, Sura.

**VOCABULARY A**

Frame tale, cliffhanger, oral storytelling, morality tales, chronology, predictive reading.

**VOCABULARY A**

Non-fiction, autobiography, Hajj, Nation of Islam, religious sects.

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/MATERIAL/TEXT/FILM/RESOURCES**

Aslan, Reza. *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. New York: Random House Paperbacks, 2006.

Lyons, Malcolm, trans. *The Arabian Nights Tales of 1001 Nights Vol. 1*. London: Penguin Books, 2008.

X, Malcolm. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. London: Penguin Books, 1964.