Old Tales, New Voices

Analyze how a modern retelling reshapes an ancient epic.

10.T.PM.1.a "Explain how a modern author adapts an archetypal story, myth, event, or figure to new purposes and circumstances. (I)"

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline details Atwood keeps from Homer, circle details she changes, and write 1, 2, or 3 beside each change to show whether it gives Penelope a voice, gives the maids a voice, or changes the tale's purpose.

Atwood Retells The Odyssey

1 Margaret Atwood's 2005 novel The Penelopiad retells parts of Homer's ancient Greek epic The Odyssey from Penelope's point of view. In Homer's poem, Penelope is known for waiting faithfully while Odysseus struggles to return home after the Trojan War. Atwood keeps that familiar situation, but she places Penelope in the Underworld, where she can speak after death. This setting lets Penelope question the heroic tale that made Odysseus famous. Instead of presenting her only as a patient wife, the novel portrays her as an observant narrator who remembers loneliness, uncertainty, and the limits placed on women.

2 Atwood also changes whose experiences matter. Homer identifies several household women, including Melantho, a maid who mocks Odysseus while he is disguised as a beggar. Yet the epic mainly follows the choices and travels of male heroes. In The Penelopiad, twelve maids speak together in a chorus between sections of Penelope's account. They describe their work, their fear, and their anger. Their chorus returns repeatedly to their deaths after Odysseus comes home. Homer says Odysseus orders the disloyal maids executed, and Telemachus chooses hanging rather than death by the sword. Atwood makes the maids challenge the justice of that outcome.

3 By moving an ancient story into a modern novel, Atwood uses old characters to examine concerns that matter to many modern readers, such as who gets believed and who is left out of official stories. Her Underworld narrator can look back on events and dispute versions told by celebrated heroes. The chorus also borrows a feature of Greek drama, but its songs sound like accusations and testimony. These choices do not simply update costumes or language. They shift the purpose of the tale. Homer's epic celebrates a hero's homecoming, while Atwood's retelling asks readers to notice the people harmed when power decides which stories deserve to last.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Which central situation from Homer does Atwood keep, and what new circumstance does she give Penelope?

2. How does making Penelope the narrator change the way readers can view Odysseus's heroic story?

3. How does Atwood adapt the role of the twelve maids, and what effect does that change create?

4. What new purpose does Atwood's retelling have compared with Homer's epic? Use one detail from the passage in your answer.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Choose an archetypal story, myth, event, or figure you know. In 3 sentences, name the source, describe two changes you would make in a modern retelling, and explain the new purpose of your version.

ANSWER KEY

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GRADE 10 · 10.T.PM.1.a

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline details Atwood keeps from Homer, circle details she changes, and write 1, 2, or 3 beside each change to show whether it gives Penelope a voice, gives the maids a voice, or changes the tale's purpose. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Which central situation from Homer does Atwood keep, and what new circumstance does she give Penelope?	**She keeps Penelope waiting for Odysseus to return, but places Penelope in the Underworld so she can tell her story after death.**
2	How does making Penelope the narrator change the way readers can view Odysseus's heroic story?	**Penelope can question the celebrated heroic version and describe her loneliness, uncertainty, and limited power.**
3	How does Atwood adapt the role of the twelve maids, and what effect does that change create?	**She gives the maids a speaking chorus that describes their experiences and challenges whether their deaths were just.**
4	What new purpose does Atwood's retelling have compared with Homer's epic? Use one detail from the passage in your answer.	**Homer celebrates a hero's homecoming, while Atwood asks readers to notice people excluded or harmed by powerful official stories, such as the maids.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would adapt the folktale Little Red Riding Hood into a story about a teenager delivering medicine during a city blackout. The wolf would become a scammer using false emergency messages, and the grandmother would be a retired cybersecurity worker who helps expose him. These changes would turn a warning about strangers into a story about checking digital information and protecting neighbors.

Accept responses that accurately identify an inherited element, explain a specific adaptation, and connect that adaptation to a changed purpose or audience concern. For Part 3, accept varied source material if the student clearly describes two purposeful modern changes.