

ART ACROSS THE CURRICULUM | ENGLISH

ALLEGORY, PARODY AND APPROPRIATION WITH GIAMBATTISTA TIEPOLO'S *THE BANQUET OF CLEOPATRA*

LEVELS 9–10

OVERVIEW

In this resource, students investigate the painting *The banquet of Cleopatra*, c.1743–44 by Giambattista Tiepolo and selected literary texts to examine how artists and writers use literary devices like symbolism, allegory, parody and appropriation to create meaning.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Analyse and interpret Tiepolo's *The banquet of Cleopatra* c.1743–44
- Practise writing in a number of text types inspired by themes in the painting
- Investigate how writers and artists use the devices of symbolism, allegory, parody and appropriation to convey different levels of meaning
- Create short pieces of writing which apply allegory, parody and appropriation

Level 9

- Analyse and explain the use of symbols, icons and myth in still and moving images and how these augment meaning (VCELA431)
- Interpret and compare how representations of people and culture in literary texts are drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (VCELT435)
- Explore and reflect on personal understanding of the world and significant human experience gained from interpreting various representations of life matters in texts (VCELT437)
- Understand that authors innovate with text structures and language for specific purposes and effects (VCELA429)

Level 10

- Compare the purposes, text structures and language features of traditional and contemporary texts in different media (VCELA458)
- Evaluate the impact on audiences of different choices in the representation of still and moving images (VCELA459)
- Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts (VCELT460)
- Identify, explain and discuss how narrative viewpoint, structure, characterisation and devices including analogy and satire shape different interpretations and responses to a text (VCELT463)
- Compare and evaluate how 'voice' as a literary device can be used in a range of different types of texts such as poetry to evoke particular emotional responses (VCELT465)
- Analyse and evaluate how people, cultures, places, events, objects and concepts are represented in texts, including media texts, through language, structural and/or visual choices (VCELY466)

ABOUT THE WORK



IN SCHOOL

1. GIAMBATTISTA TIEPOLO, *THE BANQUET OF CLEOPATRA*, c.1743–4

Giambattista TIEPOLO
The Banquet of Cleopatra
(1743-1744)
oil on canvas
250.3 x 357.0 cm
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne
Felton Bequest, 1933



1.1 THE ARTIST

Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770) —also known as Giambattista Tiepolo —was the most celebrated Venetian rococo artist of the eighteenth century. Rococo was a style of art and architecture characterised by its use of gilding, ornament, white and pastel colours, theatrical decoration and *trompe l'oeil* (compositions that literally fooled the eye with optical illusion and dramatic perspectives).

Tiepolo was renowned for his use of light and colour, and his lively, airy compositions depicting scenes from religion, mythology and history. He gained a reputation as a master of fresco painting – murals painted directly onto wet plaster – and was awarded commissions in Venice, Milan, Germany and finally Spain, where he was a court painter to Charles III. He arrived in Madrid in 1762, with his sons and assistants, and over the next years painted the huge ceilings in the Royal Palace in Madrid with decorations glorifying the Spanish nation. Tiepolo died in Madrid, Spain, on 27 March 1770.

1.2 THE STORY

The banquet of Cleopatra c.1743–44, captures the pivotal moment of a story relayed by Roman author and philosopher Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) of a wager between Queen Cleopatra VII (69–30 BCE) and her lover, Roman general Mark Antony. Cleopatra wagered that she could spend the enormous sum of 10 million sesterces on a single meal. After a splendid first course, Cleopatra ordered the second course to be served. In accordance with previous instructions, the servants placed in front of her only a single vessel containing vinegar.

Cleopatra wore earrings made from two magnificent pearls that had come down to her through the hands of successive kings. Pliny called them 'the largest in the whole of history' and each one was worth 10 million sesterces. Cleopatra dramatically removed one pearl earring, dropped it in the vinegar, and when the pearl had dissolved, drank it.

This drink was so wildly extravagant, that when she removed the second earring to do as she had done with the first, arbiter Lucius Munatius Plancus stopped her and declared the bet already won. The remaining pearl was said to have been cut in two and sent to decorate the ears of the statue of Venus in the Pantheon Temple in Rome.

1.3 SYMBOLISM

Tiepolo's *The banquet of Cleopatra* is high theatre—set on a grand open stage between pairs of fluted columns and ornate colonnades, against the backdrop of the pale Alexandrian sky. A fair, blue-eyed Cleopatra sits at a white-clad table in sumptuous European dress, her golden hair and clothes heavy with pearls, opposite a surly Mark Antony, whose features are largely hidden beneath his plumed helmet and swirling scarlet robes.

On Antony's right, facing Cleopatra, sits the bearded and pasty consul Lucius Munatius Plancus, cloaked in gold. The three seated players are flanked by various servants and onlookers whose gaze, like the converging lines of the stone floor tiles, directs our eyes to the pivotal gesture—the pearl held aloft in Cleopatra's manicured hand.

Amid the triumph of Cleopatra's victory is a sense of foreboding. Pillars seem to lean in and strange figures approach breathlessly from the periphery like harbingers of ruin. The anxious faces of most of the bystanders reinforce the sense of tension and high drama.

1.4 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

When Cleopatra came to the throne in 51 BCE, aged 18, the Ptolemaic empire (founded in 305 BC) was crumbling and was increasingly reliant on the Roman Republic. Cleopatra was determined to restore Ptolemaic power. Under Cleopatra, Egypt became engaged in war with Rome.

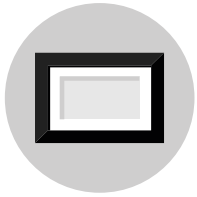
Antony and Cleopatra had a melodramatic end: after the disastrous naval battle of Actium (the decisive confrontation of the Final War of the Roman Republic), Mark Antony took his own life, thinking Cleopatra dead. Shortly after Antony's death, rather than face the humiliation of being taken as a captive before their mutual rival Octavian in Rome, Cleopatra ended her own life with the venom of an asp - a snake whose bite conferred divinity, according to Egyptian religion, and which she supposed would least affect her beauty. She was the last of the Ptolemaic pharaohs to rule Egypt.

In Tiepolo's time, Venice had similarly been stripped of the military might and commercial prestige it had once enjoyed. Though its political power was diminished, the city was still full of wealth and splendour. Rich Venetians sought to celebrate the glories of the past and their own ongoing magnificence. Artists like Tiepolo brought their dreams to life in allegories of abundance and victory. After existing for more than a thousand years, the Republic of Venice came to an end when Napoleon's forces occupied the state in 1797. Likewise, after Cleopatra's death, the rule of Egypt passed to Rome.

Stories from the life of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra were a popular theme for artists and writers in the eighteenth century. Many commentators sought to portray Cleopatra as a dissolute temptress. In contrast, Tiepolo's painting celebrates her triumph over Mark Antony who sits captivated by Cleopatra's extravagance.

By painting the characters in the dress of the Venetian court Tiepolo may have intended to subtly criticise Venetian nobility who were exhibiting the same self-indulgent, profligate behaviour as Cleopatra and Antony, and to suggest that such behaviour may lead to their downfall. Conversely, he may have depicted Cleopatra as a Venetian aristocrat to celebrate excesses in the ruling class, both in Ancient Egyptian times and in eighteenth century Venice, or to make the painting more relevant to contemporary viewers.

WARM UP



IN THE GALLERY



IN SCHOOL

2. READING THE PAINTING

Display or observe the image of *The banquet of Cleopatra* c.1743–44. Look closely at the painting for several minutes and examine the details.

2.1 LOOKING CLOSELY

This activity is best completed without knowing the details of the story.

Discuss the following questions as a group or in pairs before reporting back to the class.

- What is going on in the painting? What can you see that makes you say this?
- Who are the most important people in the painting? How has the artist suggested their relative importance?
- How has the artist suggested that this is a dramatic scene?
- Describe the facial expressions of the people standing around the table. What do they reveal about the mood in the room?
- Which period of history might this story take place? What visual clues suggest this?
- Describe the type of colours the artist has used in the painting. What do these colours suggest about the mood of the scene?
- What does the word 'banquet' in the title of the painting mean? Describe the food on the table—is this consistent with a banquet? Discuss.

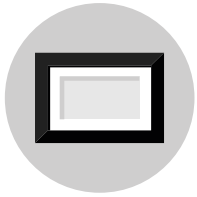
2.2 DEEPER ANALYSIS

The following questions are designed to explore the painting more deeply. Before starting the activity, share the story described in the painting.

- What is your attention drawn to? How has the artist encouraged the viewer to focus on that point?
- Mimic and then describe the facial expressions and body language of Cleopatra and Antony. How do they convey meaning?
- What do Antony and Cleopatra's respective dogs suggest about who may win the wager?
- Both Cleopatra and eighteenth century Venetian aristocracy lived decadent, pleasure-seeking lives in societies that were in decline. Suggest why Tiepolo may have depicted the Egyptian queen as a Venetian aristocrat.
- Describe other things you see in the painting. How do they communicate meaning about the narrative taking place?
- Based on his clothing and position at the table, explain the role of the man seated at the table and dressed in yellow.
- Which elements of the painting puzzle you? Explain why.
- Think about the story shown in the painting. How could you capture the essence of the story in each of the following formats?
 - Newspaper headline
 - Book title for a biography of Cleopatra
 - Title for a contemporary film

ACTIVITY

3. DESCRIPTIVE WRITING



IN THE GALLERY



IN SCHOOL

Just like a writer of literature, artists engage the viewer through vivid description, using details that bring the story to life. Share the following description of Lucius Munatius Plancus, the judge of the competition in *The banquet of Cleopatra*.

His dress is of exquisite material, exemplified by the turban decorated with a portrait cameo, but he is represented as an old reprobate, with a scruffy beard, untidy eyebrows, and thin hair, combed back.

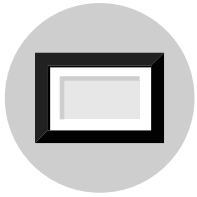
Jaynie Anderson¹

1. Identify the language features used in this extract to create a striking description.
2. Select one small section of the painting and write a detailed description of it (without mentioning the names of people if any are present). Your task is to get a classmate to guess the section of the painting you have chosen.

ACTIVITY

4. SYMBOLS AND ALLEGORY

The following activities explore how artists and writers use symbols and allegory to reflect on their view of reality and more universal ideas and concepts. You might like to use the annotated diagram on page 10 to help guide your discussion.



IN THE GALLERY



IN SCHOOL

Symbols and allegory are used by artists and writers to suggest different levels of meaning.

A symbol is a person, place or object that stands for something beyond itself and whose meaning is created by the context in which it appears. Unlike a metaphor, a symbol is not given meaning through a comparison with something else.

An allegory is a figurative work in which the narrative, characters, setting and other elements are crafted to form an extended metaphor. Allegorical works can be read on a superficial level—with a literal meaning—and on a deeper level, where the reader grasps the symbolism present. Allegories can refer to a wide variety of topics, including a well-known historical story, event, ideology, political system, idea or social issue.

4.1 REFLECTING REALITY

Consider the following questions and record your responses for future reference. Share your ideas as a class.

- Why is it that people viewing the same incident may recall it slightly differently?
- What factors affect our perception of reality? Consider, for example, how we see the world differently as a child and as an adult.
- Writer Anaïs Nin said 'We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are.'² How could this comment apply to *The banquet of Cleopatra*?

4.2 HOW REAL IS *THE BANQUET OF CLEOPATRA*?

Now consider the following questions relating to the nature of reality, but this time with a focus on the painting. You could do this as a whole class discussion.

- Have you seen images of Cleopatra before? Where?
- How does the image of Cleopatra in the painting differ from your idea of what she might have looked like?
- Does it matter if the story the painting depicts is true or imaginary? Explain your answer.
- What do you think we can learn from looking at, analysing and discussing the painting?
- American poet Muriel Rukeyser said 'Ideas and universal concepts related to humanity are more important than establishing facts. The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.'³ How might it relate to the painting?

4.3 SYMBOLISM

Which elements in *The banquet of Cleopatra* can you identify as possible symbols? What might they mean?

Possible symbols to explore include Cleopatra's pearls, the pillar on the far left, the lactating dog, and the prominence of left hands.

It is important to emphasise that there are many possible interpretations of the symbols seen in the context of the painting and that there are no definitive answers.

4.4 ALLEGORY

The banquet of Cleopatra is sometimes viewed as an allegory because the depiction of Cleopatra's decadent behaviour could be interpreted as a veiled criticism of eighteenth century Venetian aristocracy, who also indulged in excess and wastefulness.

- How is wealth and privilege depicted in the work?
- What other viewpoints are evident?
- Which parallels might be found with our society?
- In what ways is the painting relevant to our lives today?

UNPACKING THE SYMBOLS IN *THE BANQUET OF CLEOPATRA*



Pearls symbolise purity, innocence and long life. The left hand is more prominent in the painting than the right hand. In Roman times the left hand and side were associated with evil and harm. This suggests that misfortune may befall Mark Antony and Cleopatra.



Cleopatra was said to have dressed as Venus, Roman goddess of love, on her first meeting with Mark Antony. She was revered by her people as the living incarnation of Isis (the Egyptian equivalent of Venus) — goddess of fertility, magic and medicine, worshipped throughout the East.



The sphinx represents knowledge and authority.



The wine vessel in the foreground, which is associated with Dionysus, Greek god of the grape harvest, depicts the amorous liaison of Roman gods Mars and Venus.



The cowering dog indicates Mark Antony's power.



Antony linked himself to Dionysus/Bacchus, the Greek/Roman god of wine, and Osiris, the Egyptian god representing the king of kings, who was venerated by both Greek Egyptians and native Egyptians.



Cleopatra's lactating lap dog represents her fertility and her role as a leader, provider and protector. In contrast with Antony's submissive whippet, this tiny but confident lapdog speaks of the power struggle between the two rulers—with Cleopatra's intellect and cunning outshining Mark Antony's prowess as a hunter, fighter and commander.



Serapis - a Graeco-Egyptian god introduced by Ptolemy I as a means to unify the Greeks and Egyptians. Serapis was the consort of Isis and the main deity of Alexandria, where this scene is set.



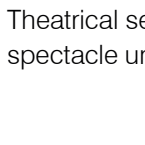
The central fruit bowl is decorated with a head of Egyptian goddess Isis, goddess of love, marriage, magic, fertility.



Dramatic one point perspective draws attention and focus to the pivotal gesture of the hand with the pearl.



Pillars leaning in emphasise the dramatic perspective and imply the impending collapse of a great empire.



Theatrical setting establishes the grand nature of the spectacle unfolding.

ACTIVITY

5. PARODY



IN SCHOOL

The following activities explore how artists and writers use parody to reframe an existing work, character or event to convey a new perspective.

Parody involves imitating the original style of a person or thing (such as a writer, artist, political leader, genre or style of government) in a humorous or satirical way.

Parodies in popular culture include comedy sketch shows that mock current events, often by ridiculing the behaviour of politicians or celebrities, such as Australian comedies *Mad as Hell* and *Utopia* and films such as *Monty Python* and the *Holy Grail* (which parodies King Arthur and his knights' quest to find the Holy Grail), *Shrek* (which parodies traditional fairy tales) and *Austin Powers* (which is a spoof of the James Bond movies).

5.1 SHAKESPEARE AND PARODY

William Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130* was written at a time when conventional love poetry involved the worship of an idealised lover, who was often compared in an exaggerated way to the natural beauties of the world. When Shakespeare was alive, the grandiose metaphors used in this type of poetry had already become cliché.

Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare
William Shakespeare⁴

Read the sonnet aloud as a class and use the following questions to explore the themes:

- How can you tell that Shakespeare was writing a parody of the conventional love poetry he was used to reading? Provide two examples from the text.
- What is the message communicated by the final couplet?

5.2 A PARODY OF THE PAINTING

This activity explores how the painting can be parodied in writing. Look at *The banquet of Cleopatra* and read the following extract about the painting written by Australian poet John Forbes.

On Tiepolo's Banquet of Cleopatra

Any frayed waiting room copy of *Who*
could catch this scene: flash Euro-
trash surveys a sulky round faced
überBabe who's got the lot—what else
could this painting mean, except that
superstars can will their luck
John Forbes⁵

Unpack the extract with the following questions:

- Define the terms 'überBabe' and 'Euro-trash'
- What does 'Who' mentioned in the poem refer to?
- In your own words, explain how the extract from the poem parodies the story depicted in the painting

ACTIVITY

6. APPROPRIATION



IN SCHOOL

Appropriation is the re-contextualisation of a subject or idea to create a different 'reality' or meaning.

The following activities explore *The banquet*, 2013, a photographic reinterpretation of Tiepolo's *The banquet of Cleopatra* created by a Melbourne based youth arts organisation called Visionary Images .

First, view an image of the work and read some background information about it on the Visionary Images website: http://visionaryimages.org/?page_id=727

- Which features in the image reveal it is an appropriation?
- Compare and contrast the appropriation with the original artwork. Explain which aspects are the same, different or missing entirely.
Consider body language, clothing, roles of people depicted, architecture, action taking place, setting and period in time.
- Which celebrities have been used to represent Antony and Cleopatra? Which other celebrities can you identify? Why might the artists have chosen to feature celebrities?
- Why might the artists have chosen to represent the servants as fast-food outlet staff rather than well-known celebrities?
- How does the choice of celebrities date the work or affect our interpretation of it? Which celebrities might be used today?
- Why do you the artists have chosen to appropriate *The banquet of Cleopatra*? What message are the artists communicating through the appropriated image?

PROJECT



IN SCHOOL

7. A FEAST OF IDEAS

Choose one or more of the creative projects below. Utilise your knowledge of the different literary devices practised in the activities to communicate your ideas.

7.1 ALLEGORY

Consider a situation or issue in society today that needs to be challenged, for example, bullying, greed or homelessness. Use your chosen issue as a basis to create a simple allegorical story of 400–500 words. It should take place in a different context, such as another period in history, in the future or in an imaginary world. The story should depict the situation or issue without naming it directly.

While the surface-level story should make sense independently, it should also comprise of plot incidents, characters and themes that convey truths about the social issue they have chosen to allegorise.

Depending on the interests and abilities of your class, some students might wish to write a simpler allegorical story. The tale should communicate a particular moral that they feel strongly about. In this instance, students should read some of Aesop's fables before writing.

7.2 A PARODY OF THE PAINTING IN DIALOGUE

Write a short dialogue between Antony and Cleopatra that parodies the scene depicted in the painting by 'sending it up', using exaggeration and humour.

7.3 APPROPRIATION: A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Choose one of the following formats to create an appropriation of *The banquet of Cleopatra*:

- Computer game
- Board game
- Reality TV show (involving cooking or renovating)
- TV quiz show
- Magazine advertisement for a restaurant
- Short story for primary students that involves teaching a moral lesson
- Celebrity interview with Antony and Cleopatra

NOTES

1. Jaynie Anderson, *Tiepolo's Cleopatra*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 2003.
2. Anaïs Nin, *Seduction of the Minotaur*, The Swallow Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1961, p. 124.
3. Muriel Rukeyser, 'The Speed of Darkness, IX.', *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, 1992, cited in Poetry Foundation, 2020, 'The Speed of Darkness', *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56287/the-speed-of-darkness>, accessed 6 October 2020.
4. William Shakespeare, *No Fear: Sonnet 130*, 1609, cited in 'Shakespeare's sonnets', *Sparknotes*, 2020, Barnes and Noble, https://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/shakespeare/sonnets/sonnet_130/, accessed 6 October 2020.
5. John Forbes, *On Tiepolo's Banquet of Cleopatra*, 1998, cited in *Australian Poetry Library*, 2020, University of Sydney and Copyright Agency Ltd, <https://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/forbes-john/poems/on-tiepolos-banquet-of-cleopatra-0460120>, accessed 6 October 2020.

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