Lesson 17
Understanding Vocabulary in Literary Texts

Learning Target

Figuring out the meanings of unfamiliar words and phrases in a literary text, including words about other traditional stories, helps you understand the text.

Read
A story, poem, or play may include a word or phrase you don’t know. Try using context clues to help you figure out its meaning. Synonyms, antonyms, and other sentences surrounding it often suggest the meaning of an unknown word or phrase.

At times, an unknown word may allude to, or mention, a well-known person or place from mythology. These ancient stories describe human behavior or beliefs, and authors refer to them to make a special point. To understand an author’s meaning, you must learn about those significant, or important, characters.

Read the story below. What are the meanings of odyssey and locate?

The Search
As I strolled home after a day of fun, I realized I’d lost my best baseball cap. So I went searching everywhere for it. My odyssey took me far and wide and finally back home. Despite my long journey, I’d failed to locate it, that is, until I sat down. It had been in my back pocket all along!
Think  How can context clues help you learn the meanings of unknown words and phrases? Complete the chart below to show what you have figured out about the meanings of *odyssey* and *locate*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unknown Word</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Possible Meaning</th>
<th>Clues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>odyssey</em></td>
<td>“My odyssey took me far and wide . . .”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>locate</em></td>
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</table>

Talk  Share your chart with a partner.
- Did your possible meanings agree?
- Which context clues did you use?
- Reread the “The Search.” How does knowing the meanings of these two words help you better understand the passage?

Academic Talk
Use these words and phrases to talk about the text.
- context clues
- mythology
- allude to
- significant
1. As the annual school track meet approached, all I could think about was defeating Anna Banks. For the past three years, she'd beaten me in the 400-meter run, and always by just a step. No longer would I be satisfied with second place, however. Dissatisfied, I planned to win this year, and I couldn’t think about anything else. I became obsessed with beating Anna. My thoughts focused on one goal all the time—winning. Naturally, I did more than just think. I practiced my starts daily, and I ran and ran and ran.

2. On the day of the race, I was eager to compete, and by the time we gathered at the starting line, I was really pumped. BAM—the starting gun fired and we were off! Anna and I quickly sprinted ahead of the other racers. When we shot across the finish line, I wasn’t even certain who’d won at first. Then I heard the announcer—it was me!

3. Still breathing hard, Anna rushed over, smiling, and shook my hand. “You were great!” she declared. “Good race!” Right then, I realized that I’d been looking at the situation all wrong. Before, I’d been thinking of Anna as if she were some powerful enemy out to destroy me. But Anna wasn’t my nemesis\(^1\) at all; she had no urge to crush me. In fact, she had given me an opportunity to become a better sprinter than I ever would have been without her.

\(^1\text{nemesis: a powerful rival; from the Greek goddess who punished overconfidence}\)
How do context clues help you figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words in “Out to Win”?

**Think**

1. Complete the chart below to show what you have figured out about the meanings of the words.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unknown Word</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Possible Meaning</th>
<th>Clues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dissatisfied</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>obsessed</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>nemesis</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Talk**

2. Explain the meaning of the word *opportunity* (paragraph 3). What context clues help you understand what the word means?

**Write**

3. **Short Response** Explain the meaning of *opportunity* (paragraph 3). Also include the context clues that helped you figure out the meaning of the word. Use the space provided on page 276 to write your response.
The Catfish

by Oliver Herford, *The Book of Humorous Verse*

1. The saddest fish that swims the briny ocean,
   The Catfish I bewail.
   I cannot even think without emotion
   Of his distressful tail.

5. When with my pencil once I tried to draw one,
   (I dare not show it here)
   Mayhap it is because I never saw one,
   The picture looked so queer.
   I vision him half feline\(^1\) and half fishy,

10. A paradox in twins,
    Unmixable as vitriol and vichy\(^2\)—
    A thing of fur and fins.
    A feline Tantalus, forever chasing
    His fishy self to rend;

15. His finny self forever self-effacing
    In circles without end.
    This tale may have a Moral running through it
    As Aesop had in his;
    If so, dear reader, you are welcome to it,

20. If you know what it is!

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\(^1\) *feline*: catlike

\(^2\) *vitriol and vichy*: an acid and an old word for mineral water; they are dangerous to mix
Think  Use what you learned from reading the lyric poem to respond to the following questions.

1 In the poem, one word has this definition: “to cry out in sadness or pain.” Underline the word that best fits the definition in the following lines from “The Catfish.”

   The saddest fish that swims the briny ocean,
   The Catfish I bewail,
   I cannot even think without emotion
   Of his distressful tail.

2 Read these lines from the poem.

   I vision him half feline and half fishy,
   A paradox in twins,
   Unmixable as vitriol and vichy—

   What is the meaning of paradox as it is used in the poem?
   A a creature with parts that don’t seem to go together
   B a furry fish with a brother that looks just like him
   C a scaly cat that is confused and spins around
   D a make-believe animal that has two different heads

Talk

3 Reread lines 13–14. Tantalus is a criminal in a Greek myth. He is punished by keeping delicious food and drink forever just out of his reach. Why does the poet describe the catfish as a “feline Tantalus”? Use the chart on page 277 to organize your ideas about the poem.

Write

4 Short Response Use details from the poem and your discussion to explain why the poet calls the catfish a “feline Tantalus.” Use the space provided on page 277 to write your response.

HINT Think of what you know about a cat’s usual reaction to a fish.
Short Response  Explain the meaning of opportunity (paragraph 3). Also include the context clues that helped you figure out the meaning of the word.

HINT  Reread paragraph 3 to find all the clues to the meaning of opportunity.

Check Your Writing

☐ Did you read the prompt carefully?
☐ Did you put the prompt in your own words?
☐ Did you use the best evidence from the text to support your ideas?
☐ Are your ideas clearly organized?
☐ Did you write in clear and complete sentences?
☐ Did you check your spelling and punctuation?

Don’t forget to check your writing.
Use the chart below to organize your ideas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unknown Word</th>
<th>Context in Poem</th>
<th>Possible Meaning</th>
<th>Clues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Write  Use the space below to write your answer to the question on page 275.

4 Short Response  Use details from the poem and your discussion to explain why the poet calls the catfish a “feline Tantalus.”

HINT  Think of what you know about a cat’s usual reaction to a fish.
A Golden Vase
and Two Bright Monkeys
adapted from a Tibetan folktale

Long ago in Tibet, two friends named Dorje and Sonam hiked through the mountains looking to find a rare plant root used in medicines. They searched and dug for most of the day, with no results. Suddenly a clang rang out! Dorje's spade had hit something hard! Eagerly digging, the men unearthed a large vase.

"Surely this is pure gold!" Sonam exclaimed, as he brushed off the dirt. He held up the rare treasure, which shimmered in the bright sunlight. "We must have the touch of Midas," Sonam joked.

"Not so fast," Dorje said thoughtfully. Then a sly look crept across his face. "Before we start living like kings, we should test the vase," he added. "Remember, all that glitters is not gold. As it happens, I know a man who makes gold jewelry. If he tells me the vase is genuine, I will sell it, and then you and I will share the money."

Trusting his friend, Sonam gave Dorje the vase. The two friends parted, agreeing to meet in two days to divide any profits from the sale of the vase.
The goldsmith informed Dorje that the vase was indeed gold. But two days later, when the friends again met, Dorje greeted Sonam with sorrow in his eyes and a mournful face.

“What is wrong, Dorje?” asked Sonam.

“Alas!” sighed Dorje dramatically. “Our hopes have been bitterly crushed. By accident I set the vase too close to the fire, and it melted into a worthless lump of pewter. It was only cheap metal after all.”

Sonam was not taken in by Dorje’s tale, but he hid his suspicions. He just sighed and then softly replied, “Never mind. Since the vase was worth nothing, nothing has been lost.”

Relieved that Sonam had taken the bad news so well, Dorje invited him to stay overnight with his family.

The next morning Sonam said, “Friend Dorje, I want to thank you for your efforts with the vase and repay you as you deserve. May I invite your two dear children to visit my home in the country? They can play with my pet rabbits, swim in my lake, and breathe fresh air. Let them come home with me for a nice vacation!”

As soon as the children heard of the plan, they pestered and pestered until their parents agreed.
Soon Sonam set off for home with the children for company. Eventually they came to a place called Monkey Hill, the home of many wild monkeys. Sonam captured two young creatures and put them in a small cage. “We will take these little fellows home as pets. You can play with them if you treat them kindly,” he explained. “I will name a monkey after each of you, we’ll teach them tricks, and they will be your twins!”

Quick learners, the young monkeys soon imitated the way the children tilted their heads or moved in a certain way. Sonam and the children spent many hours together, laughing at the way the monkeys mimicked whatever the children did.

Then came the last day of vacation. Sonam gave each child a basket and shooed them outside. “Walk up the mountain to gather berries and fruits,” he said. “We will surprise your father with a tasty treat before you return home.”

Then Sonam waited. Hearing Dorje approach, he sat down with the monkeys. Holding each one gently, he put on a tragic face.

“What is wrong, my friend?” asked Dorje.

“Alas!” sighed Sonam. “These are now your lovely children. You see, I took them to Monkey Hill. But I accidentally allowed them too near the beasts. Your children were transformed into these monkeys, right before my eyes!”

Sonam called the monkeys by name, and they began their tricks. They imitated the way Dorje’s children jumped, walked, and even smiled, just as they had been taught. At first, Dorje was speechless. “H-h-how can this be?” he sputtered. “Is such a thing even possible?”

“It was a freak accident,” Sonam replied. “After all, strange things do happen from time to time. Why, I know of a recent case in which a gold vase was turned into cheap metal.” Then a twinkle crept into his eyes.

“Oh!” was all Dorje could say at first. Then a look of shame and relief spread over his face. “Now I understand, my friend,” he said. “Keeping the money for the vase was dishonest. I will gladly hand over what I owe you, if you will pardon my foolish greed.”

Just then, Dorje’s children ran in and hugged their father. All was gradually forgiven, and Sonam and Dorje remained friends for life.

Dorje would often retell the tale of the bright monkeys. And he would always end by saying, “I learned a valuable lesson that day. As you know, a true friend is a treasure greater than gold.”
Think  Use what you learned from reading the folktale to respond to the following questions.

1  In Greek mythology, King Midas was granted the power to turn any object into gold simply by touching it. Why did the author use the phrase “the touch of Midas” in paragraph 2?
   A  to show that Dorje and Sonam have Midas-like powers because they turned the vase they found into gold
   B  to compare Dorje and Sonam’s good fortune in finding the vase to Midas’s ability to make gold
   C  to show that Sonam is well educated, while Dorje is unfamiliar with the story of King Midas
   D  to compare Dorje and Sonam’s rare golden treasure to similar treasures owned by rich kings like Midas

2  This question has two parts. First, answer Part A. Then answer Part B.

Part A
What is the best meaning of the word pewter in paragraph 7?
   A  a metal that shines like gold
   B  a metal that is soft and melts easily
   C  a metal that is not costly
   D  a metal that is not useful

Part B
Underline two story details that support the answer to Part A.

“Alas!” sighed Dorje dramatically. “Our hopes have been bitterly crushed. By accident I set the vase too close to the fire, and it melted into a worthless lump of pewter. It was only cheap metal after all.”
This question has two parts. First, answer Part A. Then answer Part B.

**Part A**
What is the meaning of the word *mimicked* as it is used in paragraph 13 of “A Golden Vase and Two Bright Monkeys”?

A tried  
B watched  
C found  
D copied

**Part B**
Circle one word in the paragraph below that helps the reader understand the meaning of *mimicked*.

Quick learners, the young monkeys soon imitated the way the children tilted their heads or moved in a certain way. Sonam and the children spent many hours together, laughing . . . .

In the paragraphs 17 and 18 shown below from the story, one word has the following definition: “to change completely in appearance or structure.” Underline the word that **best** fits the definition.

“Alas!” sighed Sonam. “These are now your lovely children. You see, I took them to Monkey Hill. But I accidentally allowed them too near the beasts. Your children were transformed into these monkeys, right before my eyes!”  
Sonam called the monkeys by name, and they began their tricks. They imitated the way Dorje’s children jumped, walked, and even smiled, just as they had been taught.
Write

5 Short Response Paragraph 19 of the passage uses the phrase “freak accident.” Explain what the phrase means as it is used in the passage. Support your possible meaning with context clues and details from the text.

Learning Target

In this lesson, you learned how to use context clues to figure out the meanings of unknown words and phrases. Explain how this will help you better understand a story or poem.