Literature and Ancient Egypt

Laurie Molina

**Grade Level:** Secondary Level

**Objectives:**
1. Introduce students to the details literature can share with the historian or geographer.
2. Give students the opportunity to analyze literature for historic, cultural, and geographic information.

**Materials:** Reading from Ancient Evenings by Norman Mailer

**Procedures:**
1. Review basic beliefs and cultural traits for the ancient Egyptians. (You can use the typical text material if a better resource book is not available.)

2. Introduce the use of literature to explore behaviors of other civilizations, especially ancient ones.

3. Give students the Ancient Evenings reading and read it aloud with them in class. Put the following question on an overhead transparency or the board and discuss with the class before asking them to explore these issues in cooperative groups:

What does the reading tell us about Ancient Egypt's:

- Economy?
- Technology?
- Ideas?
- Customs?
- Objects?
- Political Beliefs?
- Arts?
- Sciences?
- Leisure Activities?
- Belief Systems?

Do the rules for embalmment favor or penalize any particular group of people? Which ones, if any? Was there a class system in Ancient Egypt? What evidence can you cite for your answer from the story?

4. In groups, have students explore the reading and its clues to other aspects of Ancient Egyptians. When groups have completed the assignment, have them discuss their findings and the evidence for their analysis.
Evaluation:
Completion of the analysis assignment and participation in the group discussion.

**Benchmarks:**
SS.A.2.4.2- Understands the rise of early civilizations.
**GEOGRAPHY STANDARD 10:** The characteristics, distribution, and complexity of earth’s cultural mosaics.
The Embalmment of Menenhetet

From Ancient Evenings (1983), by Norman Mailer

A hook went into my nose, battered through the gate at the roof of the nostril, and plunged into my brain. Pieces, gobbets, and whole parts of the dead flesh of my mind were now brought out through one aperture of my nose, then the other.

Yet for all it hurt, I could have been made of small rocks and roots, I ached no more than the earth when a weed is pulled and comes up with its hairs tearing away from the clods of the soil. Pain in present, but as the small cry of the uprooted plant. So did the hooks, narrow in their curve, go up the nose, enter the head, and poke like blind fingers in a burrow to catch stuffs of the brain and pull them away. Now I felt like a rock wall at the base of which rakes are ripping, and was warm curiously as though sunlight were baking, but it was only the breath of the first embalmer, not with wine and figs – how clear was the sense of smell!…

I gagged as a particularly caustic drug, some wretched mixture of lime and ash, was poured in by the embalmers to dissolve whatever might still be stuck to the inside of my skull.

How long they worked I do not know, how long they allowed that liquid to dwell in the vault of my emptied head is but one more question. From time to time they lifted my feet, held me upside down, then set me back. Once they even turned me on my stomach to slosh the fluids, and let the caustic eat out my eyes…

Somewhere in those first few days they made an incision in the side of my belly with a sharp flat knife – I know how sharp for even with the few senses my Remains could employ, a sense of sharpness went through me like a plow breaking ground, but sharper as if I were a snake cut in two by a chariot wheel, and then began the most detailed searching. It is hard to describe, for it did not hurt, but I was ready in those hours to think of the inside of my torso as common to a forest in a grove, and one by one trees were removed, their roots disturbing veins of rock, their leaves murmuring. I had dreams of cities drifting down the Nile like floating islands. Yet when the work was done, I felt larger, as if my senses now lived in a larger space. Was it that my heart and lungs had been placed in one jar, and my stomach and small intestines in another? Leave it that my organs were spread out in different places, floating in different fluids and spices, yet still existing about me, a village. Eventually, their allegiance would be lost. Wrapped and placed in the Canopic jars, what they knew of my life would then be offered to their own God…

Not at all was this embalming tent as I had expected, no, no bloody abattoir like a butcher stall, more like an herb kitchen. Certainly the odors encouraged the same long flights of fancy you could find in a spice shop. Merely figure the vertigos of my nose when the empty cavity of my body (so much emptier than the belly of a woman who has just given birth) was now washed, soothed and stimulated, cleansed, peppered, herbified, and left with a resonance through which no hint of the body’s corruption could breathe. They scoured the bloody inside with palm wine, and left the memories of my flesh in ferment. They pounded in spices and peppers, and rare sage from the limestone foundations to the West; then came leaves of thyme and the honey of bees who had fed on thyme, the oil of orange was rubbed into the cavity of the ribs, and the oil of lemon balmed the inside of my lower back to free it of the stubborn redolence of the viscera. Cedar chips, essence of jasmine, and branchlets of myrrh were crushed – I could hear the cries of the plants being broken more clearly than the sound of human voices. The myrrh even made its clarion call. A powerful aromatic (as powerful in the kingdom of herbs as the Pharaoh’s voice)
was the myrrh laid into the open shell of my body. Next came cinnamon leaves, stem, and cinnamon bark to sweeten the myrrh. Like rare powders added to the sweetmeats in the stuffing, of a pigeon, were these bewildering atmospheres they laid into me...When done, they sewed up the long cut in the side of my body, and I seemed to rise through high vales if fever while something of memory, intoxicated by these tendrils of the earth, began to dance...

Cleaned, stuffed, and trussed, I was deposited in a bath of natron – that salt which dries meat to stone – and there I lay with weights to keep me down. Slowly, over the endless days that followed, as the waters of my own body were given up to moisture, with its insatiable desire to liquefy my meats, had to leave my limbs. Bathed in natron, I became hard as the wood of a hull, then hard as the rock of the Khaibit...The hardened flesh of my body became like one of those spiraled chambers of the sea that are thrown up on the beach, yet contain the roar of waters when you hold them to your ear...

Once more I felt the ministrations of the embalmers, and lived through the hours when they washed the natron from my hardened body with the liquor of a vase that held no less then ten perfumes, “O sweet-smelling soul of the Great God,” they intone, “You contain such a sweet odor that Your face will never change or perish.” words I did not hear, but their cadence had been heard before. I understand what was said, and never had to sniff the unguent with which they rubbed my skin and smeared my feet, laid my back in holy oil and gilded my nails and my toes. They laid special bandages upon my head, put the bandage of Nekheb on my brow, and Hathor for my face, Thoth was the bandage over my ears, and folded pieces within the mouth and a cloth over the chin and back of the neck, twenty-two pieces to the right of my face were laid in, and twenty-two to the left. They offered up prayers that I might be able to see and hear in the Land of the dead, and they rubbed my calved and thighs with blackstone oil and holy oil. My toes were wrapped in linen whose every piece had a drawing of the jackal, and my hands were bandaged in another linen on which were images of Isis and Hep and Ra and Amset. Ebony gum-water was washed over me. They laid in amulets as they wrapped, figures of turquoise and gold, of silver and lapis-lazuli, crystal and carnelian, and a ring was slipped over one gold-painted finger, its seal filled with a drop of each of the thirty-six substances of the embalmer. They laid on flowers of the ankham plant, and widths and windings of linen, narrow strips longer than the length of a royal barge, and folded linens to fill my cavities...I breathed the embalming resin that would seal the cloth to my pores of stone. I heard the sound of prayers, and the soft breath of the artists as they painted my burial case and sang to one another in the hot tent beneath the moving sun, and on a day I came to know at last the sounds of paving stones thundering beneath a sledge while I was dragged with all the weight of my case to the tomb where I would be put away in my enclosing coffins, and I could hear the quiet sobbing of the women, delicate as the far-off cry of gulls and the invocation of the priest: “The God Horus advances with His Ka.” The coffin case bumped on the steps of the tomb. Then hours passed – was it hours? — in a ceremony I could neither hear nor smell, but for the grating of vessels of food and the knocking of small instruments and the sound of liquors being poured upon the floor, but that resounded through the stone of me like an underground river in a cavernous fall, and then the blow of a rock fell on my head and was followed by the grinding of chains, but it was only the scratch of an instrument upon my face. Then I felt a great force opening my stone jaws, and many words flowed into my mouth. I heard a roaring of the waters of my conception, and sobs of heartbreak – my own? I did not know. Rivers of air came to me like a new life – and the forgotten first instant of death also came and was gone as quickly. Then was my Ka born, which is to say I was born again, and was it a day, a year, or not for the passing of ten Kings? But I was up and myself again...