

*Island of the Blue Dolphins*  
**Allegory and the Trope of Discovery**

**Grade Level**

High School: Ninth Grade through Twelfth Grade

**Subject**

Literacy and Language Arts, Social Studies

**Common Core Standards**

9–10.SL.1, 9–10.SL.1.B, 9–10.SL.2, 11–12.SL.1, 11–12.SL.1.A, 11–12.RH.1, 11–12.RH.2, 11–12.RH.4, 11–12.RH.7, 11–12.RH.8, 11–12.RH.9

**Background Information**

The goal of this lesson is to reinforce students' understanding of the Doctrine of Discovery and introduce the role it has played in European and American history. This lesson also requires students to interpret allegory in visual images and to use what they have learned to create their own memorial plaque for the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island.

The Doctrine of Discovery was a legal premise. However, people at large came to understand the concept of discovery in part through popular images, narratives, and memorials. We will look at two examples of how the idea of discovery became commonplace. One image is from sixteenth-century Europe and the other from nineteenth-century United States. The question and activities below ask students to link the two images.

An allegory expresses a perceived truth through symbols. As a symbol in an allegorical narrative, a river might represent different things: the passage of time, the inevitability of change, the ebb and flow of ideas. The allegorical meanings in art tell us about the culture and identity of the peoples and places it depicts.

**Materials**

- Copy of activity sheet for each student (provided)
- Chart paper (for plaque-making activity)
- Pens/markers

**Procedure**

1. Prepare materials and familiarize yourself with the texts and images.
2. Introduce and/or review the concept of allegory and the Doctrine of Discovery.
3. Give each student a copy of the activity sheet and review directions.
4. Divide students into four or five small groups to complete the activity.
5. Have the class come together for presentations. Each group will present the plaque they have created for the Lone Woman to the rest of the class.

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Directions: Study the images and texts below and discuss them with your group members. Individually, answer the questions accompanying the first image on a separate sheet of paper. Then, as a group, complete the activity associated with the second image.

**Image 1**



This is a sixteenth-century engraving by Theodore Galle and Philippe Galle, in collaboration with Jan Collaert (it is based on an earlier image by Jan Van der Straet). Its title in English is *Amerigo Vespucci Rediscovered America; he called her once and thenceforth she was always awake*. The engraving was published in 1580 in a book titled *Nova Reperta* (New Reports), which was all about discoveries. The book discussed everything from gunpowder to the printing press, olive oil, eyeglasses, and America itself.

Amerigo Vespucci, the subject of the engraving, was an Italian explorer who is credited with being the first European to figure out that the Americas were a continent; they were not part of Asia. (Christopher Columbus died believing he had found a new route to the Indies.)

The term “America”—as in South America or the United States of America—derives from the name “Amerigo.” In this image, notice what Amerigo Vespucci is wearing and holding: in his right hand, he carries a cross and a flag; strapped to his right side, underneath his mantel, is armor and a sword; in his left hand, he holds an astrolabe (a tool of navigation). Behind him stand two ships.

In the hammock we find America. She is female, reclining, and scantily clad. She holds no weapons. On her head rests a feathered crown. Although she is depicted as a person, she represents the land. Even before the discovery of America, the three known continents (Europe, Asia, and Africa) were often represented as queens, and thus as stand-ins for the land. Images of these queens often appeared on maps next to their respective continents, and they also figured in paintings and drawings of the era.

In the engraving above, Amerigo represents civilization and Christianity whereas America represents a wild, untamed nature. Between the two figures, in the background, native peoples are roasting a human leg (even as the landscape is ripe with vegetation and animals for consumption).

### Questions

1. What do you think is happening in the exchange between Amerigo and America?
2. Why would this image have been a good addition to the 1580 book *New Reports*? What discoveries does it depict?
3. According to the Doctrine of Discovery, what will happen next?

Image 2



In 1928, the Santa Barbara chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) erected this plaque at Mission Santa Barbara. The Lone Woman was buried on this mission's grounds after dying in the home of George Nidever, an American sea captain who brought her to Santa Barbara from her island home. The Lone Woman had been conditionally baptized as Juana María shortly before her death.

As you can see in reading the plaque's language, it memorializes the Lone Woman (Juana María) and George Nidever together. George Nidever is a hero because he "discovered" the Nicoleña who was then baptized and died.

The DAR plaque is erected at the place of the Lone Woman's burial, and this is significant. She was thought to be the "last of her race." It is her death that enables her to become a hero when she is linked to George Nidever. The "vanishing" of her people, which is representative of the larger "vanishing" of all California Indian peoples, cleared the way for settlers like George Nidever to build an American California on their land.

## **Activity**

Your task is to create a new memorial plaque for the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island. To do so:

1. Determine what the plaque will say.
2. Select a location where the plaque will hang.
3. Decide who (if anyone) will sponsor the plaque (the 1928 plaque, remember, was commissioned by a chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution).
4. Design the plaque.
5. Decide how you will present the plaque to the class. As you plan your presentation, think about what message you are trying to convey: how does your plaque modify, complicate, or challenge the argument made in the 1928 plaque?