

Fall 8-15-2017

ENG 3099G 099: Myth and Culture Honors

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Recommended Citation

Wixson, Christopher, "ENG 3099G 099: Myth and Culture Honors" (2017). *Fall 2017*. 55.
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English 3099G: Myth and Culture

fall 2017 / Section 099 / 3.00 Credits

Dr. Chris Wixson

syllabus

The world, as we read it, is made of fragments. Discontinuous points—discrete and dispersed. . . . And what we understand of it we understand by cobbling these pieces together—synthesizing them over time. It is the synthesis we know. (It is all we know.) --Peter Mendulsund

[The study of myth can provide us with] a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us. --Adrienne Rich

course philosophy

This course explores the ways in which myth and myth-making across cultures relate to issues of identity, desire, language, epistemology, and violence. Put another way, this course considers not only how we “map” ourselves as individuals but also what binds people together, what keeps them together, what flings them apart, and what keeps them apart. Myths will be approached as organizing narratives engaged in the production of social meaning and metaphysical understanding. They are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves as we strive to make imaginative sense of the universe around us. We will begin our conversations with the detective story, a kind of secular mythology that professes the presence of a superior order behind the chaos of appearances.

Our approach to the texts in the course has as its premise the idea that what makes literature great is that it asks more questions than it answers. These texts will be challenging in both form and content. The format of each class will be relatively fluid, changing with regard to the material, my ideas, and your interests. There will be both discussion and informal lecture, and, for both to succeed, your questions, responses, and opinions are essential. Remember this is not MY class but ours.

Learning Outcomes

1. To provide opportunities for reading and appreciating complex and challenging literary works for the insight they provide about the cultures that produced them as well as our own.
2. To allow each member of the class to engage with the significant issues and questions raised by the texts through writing and class discussion.
3. To assist in the development of skills of critical thinking, interpretive analysis, and argumentative writing.

Myths concern us not only for the part they play in all primitive, illiterate, tribal, or non-urban cultures . . . but because of man's endearing insistence on carrying quasi-mythical modes of thought, expression, and communication into a supposedly scientific age.

--G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Function*

Even the observant animals are aware
That we're not very happily home here
In this -- our interpreted world.

--Rainer Maria Rilke

Souls never touch their objects. An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with. --Ralph Waldo Emerson

course texts

The Speckled Band, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Station Eleven, Emily St. John Mandel

Ashes to Ashes, Harold Pinter

The Piano Lesson, August Wilson

The Storytelling Animal, Jonathan Gottschall

Soldier's Home, Ernest Hemingway

Oedipus the King, Sophocles

The Passion, Jeanette Winterson

Shorts from:

Barnes, Carson, Cummings, Engle, Hammett, Kafka, Paumgarten, Pence, Phillips, Powers, Rilke, and Shakespeare

contact information

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Office Hours: TR 8:00-9:15, 12:30-1:45, and by appointment

assignments

*Short pieces of writing (2-3 pages) called "seed papers" that sometimes respond to a prompt and sometimes produce self-generated topics but always should be grounded in **specific** passages from our reading due the day they are due. While these will be submitted via D2L, you may be asked to present and conduct class discussion with your question. Except in extreme cases, accompanied by proper documentation, no late seed papers will be accepted.

*A critical paper (5-7 pages) that is engaged, engaging, original, and articulate

*Active, Engaged Class Participation (including quizzes) -- defined as WRITING and TALKING productively

*A Midterm and a Final Exam

final grades

Your final grade in the course will be determined by your performance on the following assignments:

Five Seed Papers	25%
One Larger Critical Paper	20%
Midterm Exam	20%
Final Exam / Manifesto	20%
Six D2L Quizzes / In-class Writings / Group Work / Active Participation	15%

attendance

Mandatory.

I expect you to be in class awake and prepared every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. In other words, arrive on time with your reading/writing assignment completed, prepared to participate in discussion. Because so much in this course relies upon in-class work, absences and habitual lateness will adversely influence your course performance. Attendance will be taken at each class session – you are allowed **two** unexcused absences before your grade is negatively affected. After that, each unexcused absence will lower your participation grade by half a letter. **Six unexcused absences will result in a "O" for participation. More than seven unexcused absences will result in a grade of no credit for the course. Habitual lateness (beyond once) will also affect your grade negatively since it is disruptive and disrespectful.** Please notify me by email if there is unexpected illness or an emergency that causes you to miss class. Do **not** get in touch asking "for the assignment" or a "rundown of what you missed." My responsibilities as an instructor lie with the students who do come to class. Excused absences are accompanied by appropriate legal or medical documentation. *Any* unexcused absence will seriously undermine your success in this course.

class preparation and participation

Mandatory.

You should come to class *with an agenda*. Put another way, you should come to each session *prepared to teach* and *prepared to engage*. Please see the Class Participation rubric (D2L) for more specifics.

Participation in an inquiry-based, Honors seminar means careful, full preparation of the reading, frequent contributions to discussions, risk-taking in writing and thinking. You should arrive every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon armed with observations, opinions, questions, and insights, ready to take an active part in the ongoing dialogue about the course materials. Class participation means that you work actively to stretch yourself intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually AND that you work actively to contribute to the class's overall movement and success. (This might mean, for example, moving from merely your position during class discussion to striving to promote dialogue between yourself and other students). What you bring to share need not be written out but should refer to specific passages in the reading as the basis for formulating a broader discussion topic or questions. We will often start class by asking seminarians to share passages and questions.

Thus, think of our meetings as potluck conversations and activities punctuated by short in-class writing and informal lectures on the material. **In order to insure the quality of our discussions, D2L short reading quizzes will be unlocked 48 hours before class and must be completed before 2:00 PM.**

Coming to class and saying you are “frustrated” with the reading and thus have nothing to contribute is intellectually lazy and irresponsible. These texts are demanding but rewarding; while there will be frustration with their complexity at times, this course understands that complexity as part of the challenge to which we aspire to rise during the semester.

For our collaborative endeavor to succeed, there are three preconditions that must be met: everyone must have done the reading and done it critically and carefully; everyone must be willing to take intellectual risks and be open to uncertainty; and everyone must be willing to engage respectfully.

You may not *like* this class or all of the readings we discuss --- which is fine. You won't like everything you have to do in life to move forward. College is a time to develop the skills to learn what is required in a professional manner and demonstrate to your professors that you *grasp* the course content. Don't come to class and sleep or check your phone or otherwise distract others and disrupt the process. **I TAKE THIS GRADE VERY SERIOUSLY.**

cell phone and computer use

You may bring your computer to class with you, assuming that you use it in a scholarly and responsible fashion. This means that you will only have applications and windows related to the current discussion open. **You may not check** social media, surf the web, play games, or otherwise distract yourself and those around you from the class conversation with technological devices. You are likewise expected to use cell phones in a responsible, respectful, and professional manner: **turn them off when you come in to class.** If you have an emergency for which you must be available, you must discuss it with me beforehand and keep your phone on vibrate. **Under no conditions are you allowed to** text message, take pictures or video (illegal in class), play games, or use the cell phone in any other manner during class. The nature of our scholarly endeavor together necessitates mutual respect and dedicated attention during the too short time we have to discuss these texts. Violating any of these policies will result in your participation grade being lowered by a full letter grade for each violation.

academic integrity

Any paper with your name on it signifies that you are the author—that the wording and major ideas are yours, with exceptions indicated by either quotation marks and/or citations. Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use (appropriation and/or imitation) of others' materials (words and ideas). Evidence of plagiarism will result in one or more of the following: a failing grade for the assignment, an F in the course, and a report filed with the Student Standards Office.

student success center

Students who are having difficulty achieving their academic goals are encouraged to contact the Student Success Center (www.eiu.edu/~success) for assistance with time management, test taking, note taking, avoiding procrastination, setting goals, and other skills to support academic achievement. The Student Success Center provides individualized consultations. To make an appointment, call 217-581-6696, or go to 9th Street Hall, Room 1302.

special needs and situations

If you have a *documented* disability and are in need of academic accommodations, please contact me as soon as possible in order to discuss arrangements.

“Everyone who tells a story tells it differently, just to remind us that everybody sees it differently. Some people say there are true things to be found, some people say all kinds of things can be proved. I don't believe them. The only thing for certain is how complicated it all is, like string full of knots. It's all there but hard to find the beginning and impossible to fathom the end. The best you can do is admire the cat's cradle, and maybe knot it up a bit more.”

–Jeanette Winterson

Eng 3099: Myth and Culture

course calendar

Dr. Chris Wixson

**Because this schedule can and probably will change, it is imperative that you bring it to each class meeting so as to make the appropriate revisions.

D2L reading quizzes will appear 48 hours before **most of our early sessions so get into the habit of regularly checking and assume that you will have to complete them twice a week in the opening weeks.

- August
- 22 Course Introduction / Stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.
Turtle's "The Documented Life"/ Winterson quote at bottom of syllabus
- 24 Armstrong's "What is a Myth?" (D2L) / **D2L Quiz #1**
Gottschall's *The Storytelling Animal* pages 21-32 and 117-123
Excerpts from Charlotte Pence's *The Branches, the Axe, the Missing* (2012) (D2L)
*****IGNORE PAGES 14 AND 26 IN PENCE'S PIECE*****
- 29 Nick Paumgarten's *The Pull* (2010) (D2L) / **D2L Quiz #2**
Pence's "Cast-Offs"
In-class screening of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Danger of a Single Story"
"There is a paradox here – a delicious one – which I cannot resolve: if there is indeed a fundamental distinction between experience and description, between direct and mediated knowledge of the world, how is it that language can be so powerful? Language, that most human invention, can enable what, in principle, should not be possible. It can allow all of us, even the congenitally blind, to see with another person's eyes." —Oliver Sacks, "The Mind's Eye," in *The Mind's Eye* (New York: Knopf, 2010).
- 31 Excerpts from William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (D2L) / **D2L Quiz #3**
- September
- 5 Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (429 B.C.) / **D2L Quiz #4**
- 7 Engle's "What Makes Superman so Darned American?" (D2L)
In-class screening of Christopher Bell TED talk

- 12 Doyle's *The Speckled Band* (1892) / **Seed Paper #1 Due (Everyone)**
 John A. Hodgson, "The Recoil of *The Speckled Band*"
 (pp. 335- last full paragraph on 338)
 (**Read Doyle's story BEFORE Hodgson's critical piece)
- 14 Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1929-30) -- "Flitcraft" parable (D2L)
- 19 Jeanette Winterson / Julian Barnes excerpts (handout)
Seed Paper #2 Due (Everyone)
- 21 Anne Carson's *Finding the Edge* (handout)
 Rilke's "Letter" / Turkle's "The Flight from Conversation" (D2L) / **D2L Quiz #5**
- 26 Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1987) / Part One
- 28 *The Passion* / Part Two / **Seed Paper #3 due (A-F)**
- October 3 *The Passion* / Part Three (pp. 79-108) / **Seed Paper #3 due (G-L)**
- 5 *The Passion* / Part Three (pp. 108-29) / **Seed Paper #3 due (M-P)**
- 10 *The Passion* / Part Four / **Seed Paper #3 due (R-Z)**
- 12 Arthur Phillips' *The Song is You* (2009) pp. 3-17
 Kafka's "The Top" (1917-23) (D2L) / **D2L Quiz #6**
 Midterm Parts One and Two Exam Review
- 17 Midterm Exam Workshop
- 19 **Midterm Exam**
- 24 Kevin Powers, *Letters Composed* (2014) (D2L) **Extra Credit Seed Paper due**
Soldier's Home (1925) [Found in Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*]
- 26 Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) / **Extra Credit Seed Paper due**
- 31 St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) / Sections #1-3
- November 2 *Station Eleven* / Sections #4-5 / **Seed Paper #4 Due (A-K)**

7 *Station Eleven* / Sections #6-7 / **Seed Paper #4 Due (L-R)**

9 *Station Eleven* / Sections #8-9 / **Seed Paper #4 Due (S-Z)**

14 cummings' "Since feeling is first" (D2L)

16 **Critical Paper Due** / Manifesto Assignment Handed Out

HAPPY THANKSGIVING BREAK!!

28 August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1988) / **Seed Paper #5 Due (A-M)**

30 *The Piano Lesson* / **Seed Paper #5 Due (N-Z)**

5 Manifesto Workshop

7 Final Exam Preparation

**Final exam date: Monday, December 11th, 2:45-4:45 PM