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ENG 3009G-001: Myth and Culture

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English 3009G: Myth and Culture

spring 2016 / Section 001 / 3.00 Credits

Dr. Chris Wixson

syllabus

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 Functions*

[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

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

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 Mendelsund

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. 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.

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.

course texts

Titus Andronicus, William Shakespeare (excerpts)

Ashes to Ashes, Harold Pinter

The Piano Lesson, August Wilson

Breath, Samuel Beckett

The Song is You, Arthur Phillips

Soldier's Home, Ernest Hemingway

Peter Pan, J.M. Barrie

The Speckled Band, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

The Maltese Falcon, Dashiell Hammett

The Passion, Jeanette Winterson

Oedipus the King, Sophocles

Shorts from Rilke, Paumgarten, Carson, Barnes, Powers, Pence, Smith, and Kafka

contact information

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assignments

*Short pieces of writing (2-3 pages) called "seed papers" in which you pose a productive question grounded in a **specific** passage and relates to the inquiry issues of the course about the text and then attempt to answer it. You may be asked to present and conduct class discussion with your question. Because these papers are primarily for discussion, no late seed papers will be accepted.

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

*Active, Engaged Class Participation — 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:

Six Seed Papers	30%
One Larger Critical Paper	20%
Midterm Exam	20%
Final Exam / Manifesto	20%
In-class Writings/ Active Participation	10%

attendance

Mandatory.

I expect you to be in class awake and prepared every 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 and because we only meet once a week, absences and habitual lateness will adversely affect your course performance. Attendance will be taken at each class session – you are allowed **one** unexcused absence before your grade is negatively affected. After that, each unexcused absence will lower your participation grade by half a letter. **Three unexcused absences will result in a "0" for participation. More than four 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 participation

Think of our meetings as potluck conversations and activities punctuated by short in-class writing and informal lectures on the material. You should come to class *prepared to talk* about the reading for that day. Participation in a college-level course means careful, full preparation of the reading, frequent contributions to discussions, risk-taking in writing and thinking. You should come to each session armed with observations, opinions, questions, and insights, ready to take an active part in the ongoing dialogue about the course materials. (This might mean, for example, moving from merely your position during class discussion to striving to promote dialogue between yourself and other students). In addition to your required short papers, what else 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. Reading quizzes and in-class writings may happen relatively frequently to ensure the quality of our discussions.

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.

class preparation

In addition to your written assignments, what else you bring to share need not be written out (although you may be asked to do so) but should refer to **specific passages** in the reading as the basis for formulating a broader discussion topic. Come to class with an agenda. That means coming with lucrative questions that you think **the texts** are asking with their form and content, not simply questions you have *about* the texts. Besides preparation, class participation also means responding constructively, respectfully, and energetically to what others in class share, that you work actively to stretch yourself intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. In short, you are expected to work actively to contribute to the class's overall movement and to strive to promote dialogue between yourself and your colleagues. **I TAKE THIS GRADE VERY SERIOUSLY.**

late papers

These are no fun for me to keep track of and only put you further behind. For each day beyond the scheduled due date, the longer critical paper will be penalized a third of a letter grade. **After a week, I will no longer accept the paper, and it becomes a “0.”** Again, if you become ill or the victim of emergency circumstances, please email me as soon as possible and stay in touch. However, lack of planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part.

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 the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) as soon as possible in order to receive approval.

Dr. Chris Wixson course calendar

January	14	Course Introduction / Samuel Beckett's "Breath" (handout) "How the Grinch Stole Christmas"
	21	Nancy Armstrong's "What is a Myth?" (handout) Excerpts from William Shakespeare's <i>Titus Andronicus</i> (handout) Excerpts from Charlotte Pence's <i>The Branches, the Axe, the Missing</i> (handout) Zadie Smith's "Joy" / Kafka's "The Top"

“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).

28 Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*
Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Speckled Band* / **Seed Paper Due (Everyone)**
John A. Hodgson, "The Recoil of *The Speckled Band*" (Sections 1-4 only)
(**Read Doyle's story BEFORE Hodgson's critical piece)

February	4	Dashiell Hammett's <i>The Maltese Falcon</i> Seed Paper #2 due (A-K)
	11	<i>The Maltese Falcon</i> / Seed Paper #2 due (L-Z)
	18	Nick Paumgarten's <i>The Pull</i> (handout) / Seed #3 due (A-M) Ernest Hemingway's <i>Soldier's Home</i> Harold Pinter's <i>Ashes to Ashes</i> Kevin Powers, <i>Letters Composed</i> (excerpts)

- 25 J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* / **Seed #3 due (N-Z)**
- March 3 Arthur Phillips' *The Song is You* pp. 3-17 / Optional "Extra" **Seed paper due**
Midterm Exam Review
- 10 **Midterm Exam**

HAPPY SPRING BREAK!!

- 24 Jeanette Winterson / Julian Barnes excerpts (handout)
Seed Paper #4 Due (Everyone)
Anne Carson's *Finding the Edge*
Rilke's "Letter" (handout) / Turkle's "Together but Alone" (handout)
- 31 Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* / Parts One and Two
- April 7 *The Passion* / Part Three / **Seed Paper #5 due (A-M)**
- 14 *The Passion* / Part Four / **Seed Paper #5 due (N-Z)**
- 21 **Critical Paper Due** / Manifesto Assignment Workshop
- 28 August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* / **Seed #6 due (A-Z)**
Final Exam Preparation

**Final exam date: Thursday, May 5th, 5:15-7:15 PM