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ENG 2601-001: Backgrounds in Western Literature

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English 2601
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Fall 2003

Texts: Homer, The Iliad (Lombardo, transl)
The Odyssey (Lombardo, trans)
 Mack, Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces
 Hanning and Ferrante (trans) Lais of Marie de France
 Dante, The Inferno (Ciardi, trans)
 Boccaccio, The Decameron (Musa and Bondanella, trans)
 Grene (trans) Greek Tragedies vol 3
 Rabelais, Gargantua

Goals: The premise of the course is that there are certain works so central to western literature that they simply must be read if that literature is to be understood. Writers often respond to earlier writers in their work; Homer, Dante, Petrarch, and others have served as models for countless English writers. Obviously, it's useful to have read them.

But these works also continue to fascinate in their own right, and the bulk of class-time will be devoted simply to talking about them: what they're saying, how we respond to them, what makes them work. As we talk about them, it's important to remember that we're reading them in translation and many centuries after they were written. In some ways they will remain unreachable, therefore; we read them only in the light of our own culture and language, and must struggle to penetrate the profoundly different worlds from which they emerged. In other ways, though, they are strangely contemporary, posing questions about how one should live, what one should value, whom one should admire . . . questions, obviously, that still concern us.

At the end of the semester you should have a greater familiarity with various literary genres, literary periods, and the western literary canon, as well as a bunch of new books to love.

Policies: English Department statement on plagiarism:

Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism--"The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author and representation of them as one's original work" (Random House Dictionary of the English Language) --has the right and the responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignment of a grade of F for the assigned essay and a grade of NC for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office. Respect for the work of others should encompass all formats, including print, electronic, and oral sources.

Plan to hand in papers on time. If you're having problems, let me know. **Papers a week or more late will not be accepted at all.**

If you have a documented disability and wish to receive academic accommodations, please contact the Coordinator of the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) as soon as possible.

This class involves a heavy reading load; make sure you plan your time so that you can keep up with the reading. Attendance at every class is expected. Note that a portion of the grade is based on class participation and weekly responses--both of which require keeping up with the reading and (obviously) being in class. Excessive absences will result in a grade of 0 for participation.

Requirements: two exams and a final (10/10/20%)

2 essays (3-5 pp each) (25%)

weekly responses (20%)

several group presentations; careful preparation of reading assignments and participation in class discussion; other brief assignments/quizzes as appropriate (15%)

Essay grades will be based on Standards for Grading Themes at EIU. I plan to use number rather than letter grades; this will convert into your final grade as follows: 91-100=A; 81-90=B; 70-80=C. 65-69=D. Because I grade on a 100-point scale, missing assignments affect the grade tremendously.

Responses: Almost every week you will be required to hand in a 1-2 page typed response to the assigned reading for any one of the three class periods (you choose which). **The response must be about the reading due on the day you hand it in; it should reflect your thoughts BEFORE class discussion. I will not accept responses handed in after the class period in which the relevant assignment has been discussed.** Responses must be handed in at the end of the class for which they are relevant and must be typed. The point of the responses is to stimulate your thinking about the assigned reading, to give you practice in analyzing it on your own, and to facilitate your involvement in class discussion.

In each response provide:

1. A 1-2 sentence summary of plot: what is the major event or conflict in the assigned portion? What questions do you have about plot?
2. Sometimes I'll give you a specific question to answer. Otherwise, focus on ONE issue or point and develop it in a substantial paragraph(s), quoting at some point directly from the assigned reading (and providing page number in parentheses each time. I will grade responses on a 10-point scale, in terms of their completeness, depth, precision, thoughtfulness. Every response should be anchored in a careful reading of the text; ALWAYS include at least one brief direct quotation as part of your response.

If illness or personal emergency keeps you from being in class on the day on which you intended to hand in a response you have two options: 1. hand in a response for another class day that week instead; 2. as a last resort, send the assignment to class with someone else and follow up with a phone call to explain.

Presentations: Frequently I'll ask you to discuss assigned texts in groups of 4 or 5. Occasionally I'll ask each group to take responsibility for a portion of the reading assignment and present it to the rest of the class. You will have time in class to prepare these 10-12 minute presentations. Your presentation will be the only way your classmates will have access to this material, so make sure your presentation is clear, interesting, and fun.

Tentative Syllabus

I. The Ancient World: The Greeks

Mon Aug 25: Intro to course

for Wed 27: Read Iliad (Lombardo) Book 1

Fri. Jan 29: Books 3; 6 [hand in response on either Wed. or Fri.]

Mon. Sept. 1: no class

Wed 3: Books 9; 14-16

Fri 5: Books 18-21 [hand in response on either Wed. or Fri.]

Mon 8: Books 22-24.

Wed 10: Odyssey (Fitzgerald), Book 1-4

Questions to consider as you write your responses:

1. read analytically

What traits or complexities do you see in the main character? how is he/she like or unlike another character? is there an apparently minor character who you think is actually quite important?

describe the settings: how do they set mood, influence plot, or establish contrasts? is the social or natural environment an element in the plot?

what conflicts are portrayed--between characters, between a character and some aspect of the environment, or within a character (between two aspects of him/herself)?

how does a character change from beginning to end?

2. interpret: what might author be saying in work as a whole?

is there a narrator or character who might serve as authorial mouthpiece?

is there a character who gains new insight or changes during course of the story?

how does title shape our understanding of the work?

is there a key phrase that echoes title or recurs?

is there a crucial turning point when someone makes a big mistake or does something right?

is there a character who is presented as admirable? as despicable?

is there an object or moment or action that works symbolically?

is there a pattern in the imagery? (series of words suggesting sensory contrasts like hot/cold or light/dark, for ex.)

what historical events would it be helpful to know about to understand the text?

how is it like or unlike other literary works?

3. think about its relation to its own culture and to your values:

if the ending is happy, at whose expense does it come?

does the resolution feel imposed, or does it seem to grow naturally out of the text? what questions are left unanswered?

do you admire any qualities of the antagonist? dislike the protagonist?

how would changing title or narrator change the text?

how are various social classes/races/ethnicities portrayed?

what qualities distinguish male from female characters?

what assumptions does it reflect about what people are like and how they should live?

given what you know about the time it was written, how might it reinforce those readers' concerns or values?

consider the social institutions of that time--kind of government, class system, economic system, educational system, religious beliefs, family structure: how does work reinforce or challenge these institutions?

what differences do you see between your own values and those suggested by the work you've just read?