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ENG 3010-001: Literary Masterworks

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English 3010G Literary Masterworks
 Fall 2005
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 Coleman 3755

Goals: This course is focused on great works of western—mainly English—literature. By “great works” or “literary masterworks” I mean books that have been read and respected for a long time and that have influenced other writers. Why have these books, rather than other, forgotten ones, come to form part of the western literary canon? The standard explanations argue they are universal and timeless in their appeal, aesthetically masterful, and complex enough to be interpretable in different ways by different readers. These qualities make them particularly worthwhile objects of study: we’ll never all agree on what they mean and we’ll never stop finding out new things about them. One goal of the course, then, is to familiarize you with these famous works.

Obviously there are many more “masterworks” than we have time to read, so I’ve selected books that are not only widely known but that cohere around themes of individuation and education. All of them, it seems to me, raise interesting questions about what it means to be a person and what qualities we admire. So another goal is to allow you to use reading and writing to explore your own values and interests.

The term “masterwork” or “masterpiece” is not a straightforward one. People argue about whether any such thing exists, and no one agrees totally on how to separate the masterpieces from the junk. I’ve included a few contemporary and less obviously “classic” works along with Dante, Shakespeare, Voltaire, and Bronte to facilitate discussion of what a masterpiece is and whether it’s a term we want to retain. So one final goal: to complicate and deepen your sense of what makes literature worth reading.

This is a writing-intensive class. You may submit a paper from this class as part of your EWP. For more information, visit the assessment website: www.eiu.edu/~assess

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.

Late work: Plan on keeping up with reading and writing assignments. If you run into problems, let me know. On-line assignments must be done for the assigned class to be acceptable. Quizzes and in-class writing may not be made up; if illness or emergency keeps you from class, let me know, and you will not be penalized. Essays a week or more late will not be accepted.

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.

Texts: *Portable Dante*; Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*; Voltaire, *Candide*; Shelley, *Frankenstein*; Bronte, *Jane Eyre*; *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; Kincaid, *Annie John*; Martel, *Life of Pi*

Requirements/grades

Two essays (one 2-3 pp., typed, the second 3-5 pp. typed): 10/20%

Midterm and final: 30%

In-class writing: quizzes and in-class writing: 15%

At least 10 on-line responses to reading: 15%

Involvement/participation: 10%

Essay grades will be based on Guidelines for Evaluating Writing Assignments in EIU's English Department. I plan to use number rather than letter grades; this will convert into your final grade as follows: 91-100=A; 81-90=B; 71-80=C; 65-70=D; below 65=F

Because I grade on a 100-point scale, missing assignments (which receive a 0) affect the grade tremendously. Any essay may be rewritten; if substantially improved, it will receive a new grade which will be averaged with the first.

On-line postings: At least once per week, I'd like each of you to write a response to the assigned reading (a paragraph or so) on the Web CT bulletin board, on-line (If this is inaccessible, give me a 1-page typed response in class instead). The response should reflect your thoughts and questions about the assigned reading BEFORE class discussion. I will not give credit for responses entered after the class period in which the relevant assignment has been discussed, though of course you're welcome to make additional comments then. Begin your posting by responding to any relevant earlier postings. Then make a single point about the reading, perhaps responding to ONE of the suggested "reading questions" below. No matter what, include a brief quotation (along with page reference in parentheses) and specific references to the text in your discussion. Feel free also to ask whatever questions you have about the reading. Please keep comments respectful and on-topic. I will not grade these individually; a grade will be given for your collected contributions based on the thoughtfulness, precision, depth, and punctuality of your comments.

Class participation/involvement: Reading well requires rereading, reading aloud, discussing, and interaction. To encourage careful preparation, a substantial portion of your grade is based on class participation and on-line responses to the assigned reading. Class participation is hard to evaluate, but here's my advice:

For an A: comment frequently in ways that advance the conversation. This could be bringing up some aspect of the reading we've forgotten, disagreeing with a student or with me, or asking a question of a student or me. Hardly ever miss class. Be a leader in group discussions and presentations.

For a B: attend consistently, look alert, and speak occasionally. Do a good job with group discussions and presentations.

For a C: say nothing and skip class occasionally. Participate in group discussions and presentations, but minimally.

Below a C: skip class often and contribute nothing.

Excessive unexcused absences will result in a 0 for involvement/participation.

Etiquette: Please make sure cell phones are turned off. Be in class punctually; in-class writing assignments will often start on the hour. If you must leave class early, please let me know ahead of time.

Tentative Syllabus

Mon August 22: Introduction to the class.

for Wed 24: Dante, Inferno cantos 1-2 (pp. 3-13)

F 26: Dante, Cantos 3-5. Post to WebCT W or F

Mon. 29: Dante, cantos 6-9

Wed 31: Dante, cantos 10-12; 15

Fri 2: Dante cantos 17-19. Post to WebCT M,W, or F

Mon 5: Labor day

Wed 7: Dante, 31-34; canto 33 of Paradise (pp. 580-5)

Fri 9: Shakespeare, *Midsummer*, Act I Hand in essay #1.

Mon 12: *Midsummer*, Act II

Wed 14: *Midsummer*, Act III

Fri 16: *Midsummer* Acts IV-V. Post to WebCT M, W, or F

Mon 19: *Midsummer*

Wed 21: *Candide* ch. 1-10

Fri 23: *Candide* 11-20 Post to WebCT M, W, or F

Mon 26: *Candide* ch. 21-20

Wed 28: *Frankenstein*

Fri 30: *Frankenstein*. Post to WebCT M, W, or F.

Mon Oct 3: *Frankenstein*

Wed 5: *Frankenstein*. Post to WebCT M, W, or F

Fri 7: Fall Break

Mon 10: *Frankenstein*

Wed 12: *Frankenstein*

Fri 14: Midterm

Mon 17: *Jane Eyre*

Wed 19: *Jane Eyre* Post to WebCT M or W

Fri 21: No class. Attend Frankenstein conference.

Mon 24: *Jane Eyre*

Wed 26: *Jane Eyre*

Fri 28: *Jane Eyre* Post to WebCT M, W or F

Mon 31: *Jane Eyre*

Wed Nov. 2: *Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Fri. 4: *Malcolm X*

Mon.7: *Malcolm X*

Wed. 9: *Malcolm X*

Fri. 11: *Malcolm X*

Mon. 14: *Malcolm X*

Wed 16: *Annie John*

Fri 18: *Annie John*. Hand in essay #2.

Thanksgiving recess

Mon 28: *Annie John*

Wed 30: *Life of Pi*

Fri Dec 2: *Life of Pi*

Mon 5: *Life of Pi*

Wed 7: *Life of Pi* Response due M or W.

Fri 9: Review

There will be a final exam (not cumulative) during exam week.

Themes:

1. What are the main traits of the hero or protagonist? To what extent are we being asked to admire them?
2. What is the process by which a person matures in this work? To what extent does it involve separation from the community and entry into a different environment? What are the characteristics of this different environment?
3. What are the main traits of the bad guy or antagonist? What values or qualities does the depiction of this figure as “bad guy” reinforce or condemn?
4. What kinds of conflicts or obstacles does a main character face? To what extent are they internal or external?
5. What kinds of assumptions about gender does the text seem to make? Are their specific roles prescribed for men and women? Are women depicted as positive or negative figures? To what extent are they equal to men? In what ways do their roles differ from men’s?
6. To what extent does race, social class, nationality, or ethnicity play a role in the plot? How does the text define insiders and outsiders? To what extent does it create a sense of community in contrast to an “other”?
7. What roles does religion play? Is there a God or gods who influences the action?
8. How is parenting depicted? To what extent do father-child or mother-child relationships seem central to the work’s plot? What does it mean to be a good “father” or “mother” or “daughter” or “son” in the world of the text?
9. What is the role of travel? Where do characters travel to? How does traveling influence them? How does their movement through space relate to their maturation? What settings are depicted? What contrasts are created between one place and another?
10. How is the process of education depicted? What do characters read? How are teachers and/or schools depicted? What idea about how people learn does the book convey?

Campbell’s “monomyth” includes:

I. separation/departure

A. call to adventure: a herald awakens the hero, often amid a dark or confusing setting; pressures on the hero to depart increase.

B. refusal of the call: sometimes the hero would rather not listen.

C. supernatural aid in the form of benign old man or woman may help the hero

D. first threshold: the hero is immersed in danger, undergoes a kind of rebirth through self-surrender

II. initiation/trials

- A. road of trials: the hero enters a fluid territory where various challenges confront him/her
- B. meeting with Goddess: a figure incarnating perfection, often mingling death/rebirth
- C. temptress may incarnate dangers of immersion in material world.
- D. atonement with father: the hero sacrifices his ego, conquering fear of punishment along with selfish desires.
- E. apotheosis: the hero attains contact with the divine, the source of the cosmos.
- F. boon: the hero gains insight into the divine as energy-substance

III. return

- A. refusal of return: sometimes the hero would like to stay and not return home
- B. magic flight: sometimes the hero must sneak home
- C. rescue from without: may need help from outside to get home.
- D. crossing of return threshold may involve difficulty, even failure
- E. master of two worlds: the hero can now retain insights of both visionary and practical worlds: insight into cosmos leads to self-surrender
- F. freedom to live: insight has now been internalized.

Opening lines of Dante's *Inferno*, transl. Mark Musa:

Midway along the journey of our life

I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
For I had wandered off from the straight path.

How hard it is to tell what it was like

This wood of wilderness, savage and stubborn
(the thought of it brings back all my old fears),

A bitter place! Death could scarce be bitterer.

But if I would show the good that came of it
I must talk about things other than the good.