Spring 8-15-2013

ENG 3009G-002: Myth and Culture

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The poet Muriel Rukeyser wrote that "The universe is made of stories, not of atoms." Myth and Culture is a course about such stories, stories so powerful that they shape the ways in which people come to understand the world and its possibilities. We will read ancient stories that do just that: the story of Gilgamesh (the oldest written story), the Book of Job, the Bhagavad-Gita, Homer’s Iliad, and three plays by Sophocles.

Our reading will give us the opportunity to think about deep human concerns: courage, duty, fidelity, friendship, justice, knowledge, love, mortality, mortality, sex, suffering, time. As you might already suspect from that catalogue, the distance between these ancient writers and us is often quite small.

TEXTS
Bhagavad-Gita (trans. Prabhavananda)
Homer, Iliad (trans. Lombardo)
Sanders, ed., Epic of Gilgamesh
Shay, Achilles in Vietnam
Sophocles, Theban Plays (trans. Meineck and Woodruff)
The Wisdom Books (trans. Alter)

Michael Harvey’s The Nuts and Bolts of College Writing is a supplement to our work, a great book for student-writers.

You should have access to a hardcover collegiate (college-level) dictionary when reading.

The works we’re reading contain material that some readers may find offensive or disturbing (language, sex, violence). In such cases, please consider taking another course.
I like to ask questions that invite thinking. I also like it when students ask me such questions. Try to think of an in-class question not as having an answer you're already supposed to know but as an invitation to think. I know that this suggestion might go against the grain of much of your experience in classrooms. You should be asking relevant questions too, of me and perhaps of one another. That helps to make the class less like a quiz show and more like a conversation.

One more observation on discussion, from the cultural critic Randolph Bourne:

A good discussion increases the dimensions of every one who takes part. Being rather self-consciously a mind in a group of minds means becoming more of a person.

As you can guess, I'm optimistic about discussion. For more on questions and discussion, read “How to answer a question”: goo.gl/DizaG.

GRADING
Your grade will be based on your written work (60%), class participation (20%), and final examination (20%).

Longer writing assignments receive letter grades. Shorter ones get numerical grades. Missing work receives a zero. Participation receives a numerical grade, an overall evaluation of the extent to which you're prepared and contributing: 100 (always), 85 (frequently), 75 (usually), 50 (sometimes), 0 (rarely or never).

To calculate semester grades, I use numerical equivalents for letter grades:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>92</td>
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<tr>
<td>D-</td>
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<td>60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Sometimes when I grade writing I'll give a grade that falls between two grades—e.g., B+/A- (89.5).

For semester grades, 90 or above is an A; 80 or above, a B; 70 or above, a C; 60 or above, a D; below 60, an F.

EWP
You may include work from the course in your Electronic Writing Portfolio. Please make sure that you understand the requirements for the EWP and that you fulfill them in a timely way. For more information: www.eiu.edu/assess/ewpmain.php.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY
The English Department's 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 the representation of them as one's original work" (Random House Dictionary of the English Language)—has the right and responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignment of a grade of F for the course.

And my statement concerning academic integrity:

Any breach of academic integrity—from a single sentence cut and pasted into a dinky little assignment to a wholly unoriginal essay—is a serious matter and will get you a serious penalty. The Student Standards office recommends an F for the course. You will also be required to take a course in ethics administered by Student Standards, whose staff will keep your misconduct on record and notify your other professors that one of their students has violated academic integrity.

You should be familiar with Eastern's statement on academic integrity and should ask if you have any questions about quoting from or documenting sources. But because the work of the course is to be an expression of your ideas in your words, aside from words and ideas from properly acknowledged sources, questions of plagiarism and collusion should never arise.

Do not "borrow" work or give your work to anyone (allowing someone else to make use of your work is also a breach of academic integrity and will also get you a serious penalty, up to and including an F for the course).

PROVISIONAL OUTLINE (WEEKS)
1: Thinking about myth and culture
1-3: Gilgamesh
4-5: Job
5-6: Bhagavad-Gita
6-10: Homer, Iliad
11-14: Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannus, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone
15: Last things

Provisional due dates for out-of-class writing: September 11, 30; October 9, 21; December 4.

Other very modest pieces of writing will be assigned as in-class writing or on a due-next-class basis.

Final examination: December 11, 2:45-4:45.