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ENG 2601-001: Backgrounds of Western Literature

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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.

Conferences: Come see me anytime you have questions/problems. I'm available most of the day MWF, by appointment Tu/Th and by e-mail other times.

Attendance: Attendance is expected, as is participation in class discussion. If you must miss class because of illness or personal emergency, let me know so you will not lose credit for work done that day. Participation and in-class writing grades will be significantly affected by excessive absences, as will exam grades, since exams will cover material presented in lectures and discussions. If you want to get a 95 for this portion of your grade, plan on always attending and speaking frequently and relevantly. Silent but reliable attendance will get you an 85. More than 4 unexcused absences will make it impossible for you to get anything higher than a 75 for this portion of your grade.

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.
Grades: 3 exams (40%)
1 mini-essay (1-3 pp.) (10%)
2 longer essays (4-6 pp.) (30% [10/20])
Web CT, in-class assignments, participation (20%)

Grading scale: 91-100=A; 81-90=B; 71-80=C. 65-70=D. Because I grade on a 100-point scale, missing assignments (which receive a 0) affect the grade tremendously. Note that 20% of the grade is based on class participation, in-class writing, and weekly responses, activities that require keeping up with the reading and attending class.

Late policy: WebCT postings must appear at least ONE HOUR before the class when assigned reading will be talked about in order to receive credit. Since the point of the posting is to help you prepare for class discussion, it’s especially important you be in class to follow up on postings. Papers handed in on time may be rewritten for a new grade, which will be averaged with the first. Rewrites are due within a week of my returning the paper. Any paper more than a week late will not be accepted at all.

Assignments:
WebCT: Each week you will be required to comment at least once on the assigned reading for any one of the three class periods (you choose which). Your response must be about the reading due that day and should be posted at least one hour before class. Each posting should:
1. Comment on at least one previous posting for that reading assignment.
2. Then focus on a single issue: make and support an observation about the reading (app. 200 words)
3. Include at least one brief direct quotation as part of your response.
I encourage you to post additional responses as well—to each other’s comments and to class discussion. Fulfilling the minimum requirements will get you a B; to receive an A for this portion of your grade, post additional responses. I’ll give you feedback on your responses via e-mail.
Check the “notes” section regularly for my comments and relevant links.

Tentative Syllabus
I. The Ancient World: the Greeks
for Wed Jan 14: Odyssey 1-2
Fri Jan 16: 3-6 WebCT w/f

Mon. Jan 19: no class
Wed Jan 21: 7-10
Fri Jan 23: 11-15 WebCT w/f
Mon Jan 26: 16-20
Wed Jan 29: 21-4

Mon Feb 2: in Gren, The Bacchae
Fri Feb 6: Groups discuss tragedies. WebCT m/w/f

Mon Feb 9: Read Aristotle in Norton, 747-50.
Wed Feb 11: Groups perform tragedies. WebCT opt.
Fri Feb 13: no class

Mon Feb 16: Plato, “Apology of Socrates” in Norton
Wed Feb 18: Plato

II. The Ancient World: The Romans
Fri Feb 20: Virgil in Norton, 817-825 WebCT m/w/f

Mon Feb 23: Virgil 825-847
Fri Feb 27: Virgil 868-95. WebCT m/w/f

Mon March 2: review
Wed March 4: exam: Greeks and Romans

III. The Middle Ages
Fri March 6: Roland 1108-1138 WebCT m/w/f

Mon March 9: Roland 1138-68
Wed March 11: Marie, “Guigemar,” “Bisclavret,” “Yonec”

March 16-20: Spring Break

Mon March 22: Dante, Inferno cantos 1-4. For fun, see http://www.4degreez.com/misc/dante-inferno-test.mv
Wed March 24: Dante cantos 5-8. Groups choose from cantos 9-22
Fri March 26: Dante group discussions. Web CT m/w/f

Mon March 29: Dante group presentations
Wed March 31: Dante cantos 23-34, especially 28; 31-4; Paradiso in Norton, 1426-1429. WebCT m/w
Fri. Ap2: exam: Middle Ages

IV. The Renaissance
Fri. Ap 9: Boccaccio. Web CT m/w/f

Mon. Ap 12: Boccaccio
Fri Ap 16: Rabelais. 83-118. Web CT m/w/f


Wed Ap 28: Review. WebCT m/w

There will be a noncumulative exam during finals week.
In writing your response to a text, consider answering any ONE of the following questions. ALWAYS begin by responding to earlier poster(s) and ALWAYS include a direct quotation (with parenthetical page number) as part of your response.

**Structure/plot**
1. what's the significance of the title?
2. what themes or images get set up by the opening paragraph?
3. is there an epigraph or are there allusions to other writers? What is its/their significance?
4. is there a recurring word or image? What is its significance?
5. Is there a passage of particular density or difficulty? What do you make of it?
6. What event happens at the exact center of the work? Is there a turning point? What changes?
7. Look closely at the work’s final lines: what loose ends do they tie together? What values do they seem to reinforce?

**Characterization**
1. What kind of person does a major character seem to be? How like or unlike other characters?
2. Contrast or compare two characters to each other or discuss a conflict between 2 characters.
3. Does a character seem to serve as authorial mouthpiece?
4. Does a character change or gain insight during the course of the story? How?
5. Is there a character who is presented as particularly despicable? In what sense?
6. Look at a character who seems insignificant: why is he/she there?
7. Is there a character who suffers from an internal conflict? explain

**Setting**
1. where does the story take place? What role does this location play in the plot?
2. what mood is created by descriptions of the setting?
3. what contrasts do shifts in setting set up (inside/outside? City/country? Night/day? Rainy/sunny?)
4. to what extent is the story about the time period in which it was set? Any relevant historical events you need to know about to make sense of it?
5. is there a conflict between a character and his/her environment?

**Narrative method**
1. who tells the story? How does this affect our understanding of it? Is the narrator omniscient? Aligned with a particular character's viewpoint? Reliable or unreliable?
2. Is it told in chronological order? If not, what leaps take place, and how do they affect our understanding?
3. What personality traits does the narrator have?
4. Imagine a different character telling the story: how might the story change?

**Theme, symbols, style**
1. what, finally, do you think the story is saying? What insights do we gain, having finished reading it?
2. is there an object or phrase or word that takes on symbolic meaning during the course of the story?
3. What do you notice about sentence length, word choice, descriptiveness, concrete vs. abstract language, the use of fragments, lists, run-ons . . . ? Why might the writer want to write about this particular topic in this way?
Major Gods – based on Hesiod

The elements

Chaos

Nox (night) = Erebus (underworld)

Love

Ether (air) | Hemera (day) | Ouranos (heaven) = Gaea (earth)

Titans

Zeus = Mnemosyne | Cronos = Rhea | Themis = Iapetus | Tethys = Oeanus | Coeus = Phoebe

Muses

Zeus = Mnemosyne

Olympians

Hestia | Hades | Poseidon | Zeus = Hera | Demeter = Zeus

Epimetheus | Prometheus

Persephone | Dione = Zeus

Ares | Hebe | Hephaestus = Aphrodite | Eros | Aphrodite