ENG 2601-002: Backgrounds in Western Literature

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This course will take us to the ancient world, a world we’re still living in. War is still the way that conflicts between states and peoples are too often settled. We still remember the dead by memorializing their names. We still experience home and becoming reconnected to people and a place. We still live in a world of imperial ambitions. We still debate the ways in which a desire we still make ourselves and others ridiculous.

We’ll travel Backwards in Western Lit to read Homer, Virgil, Ovid, and Dante; Aeschylus and Aristophanes; and Sappho. The point of reading these writers is not grimly practical; one doesn’t read Homer or Ovid merely to be able recognize references and borrowings in later works of literature. The point, rather, is to begin understanding these writers in all their imaginative and emotional power and to think about why they have had such an enduring hold on the western literary imagination. Our reading will provide a springboard for talking about a myriad of topics: myth, storytelling, epic poetry, tragedy and comedy, love poetry, literary and cultural values, gender, patriarchy, crime and punishment, empire, orality and writing, authorship, translation, parody, literary influence.

TEXTS Texts for the course are available from Textbook Rental: Norton Anthology of Western Literature, Volume One (ed. Lawall); Aeschylus’ Oresteia (trans. Meineck); Dante’s Inferno (trans. Hollander and Hollander); Homer’s Iliad (trans. Lombardo) and Odyssey (trans. Fitzgerald); Homer in English (ed. Steiner). Michael Harvey’s The Nuts and Bolts of College Writing supplements the work of the course.

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.

REQUIREMENTS The course will require dedicated daily work (reading and talking), quizzes (meant to be easy if you do the reading), several pieces of writing, and a final examination.

ATTENDANCE It’s essential. In the words of the poet and teacher Ted Berrigan, you should attend class as often as I do. You’re responsible for all assignments, whether or not you’re here when they’re announced. If you must miss a class, you should get in touch with me beforehand to find out what you will miss.

LATE, MAKE-UP WORK Missed quizzes and writing cannot be made up. Late writing is acceptable only if you have my approval in advance. If you have a properly verified absence for illness, emergency, or participation in an official University activity, I’ll record a blank for a missed quiz, not a zero.

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

OFFICE HOURS Talking to professors is one of the smartest things a college student can do. Please, come in to ask questions and talk about your work in the class.

If you feel uneasy about talking to your professors during office hours, read “How to talk to a professor” (http://leddysclass.blogspot.com).

E-MAIL Like many professors, I read and respond to student e-mail only if it’s from a university address.

Before you e-mail me, please read “How to e-mail a professor” (http://leddysclass.blogspot.com).

DECORUM The atmosphere in our class should be serious—not somber or pretentious, but genuinely intellectual. No eating, talking, sleeping, wearing headphones, doing work for other classes, or other private business. Cell phones should be turned off and kept out of sight.

DISCUSSION I like to ask questions that make people think. I also like it when people ask me such questions. So I think of discussion as a matter of asking questions to get at the substance of what we’re reading. Consider what
the writer Thomas Merton says about a teacher he admired:

Most of the time he asked questions. His questions were very good, and if you tried to answer them intelligently, you found yourself saying excellent things that you did not know you knew, and that you had not, in fact, known before. He had "educated" them from you by his question. His classes were literally "education"—they brought things out of you, they made your mind produce its own explicit ideas (The Seven Storey Mountain).

When I was a student I always felt patronized when someone replied to my contributions by saying something like "Very good" or "That's interesting," so when we talk, I try not to give those rote non-responses. If you say something when someone replied to my contributions by questions too, of me and of one another.

GRADING Writing assignments receive letter grades.

Written work (little or no participation). Missing writing receives a zero. Quizzes receive numerical grades. A quiz average of, say, 103% counts as 103 and not as an A (95); a quiz average of, say, 40% counts as 40 and not as an F (55). Participation in the course receives one of five grades: 100 (consistent, relevant, informed), 85 (frequent, relevant, informed), 75 (less frequent or less informed), 50 (occasional), 0 (little or no participation). "Informed" participation is simply participation that comes from having done the reading. You may check on quizzes and participation at any time.

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

A 95 B+ 87 B 85 B- 82 C+ 77
C 75 C- 72 D+ 67 D 65 D- 62 F 55

Sometimes when I grade an essay I'll compromise—e.g., B+/A-, which falls between the two grades (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 English 2601 is considered a "writing-intensive" course, so you may include work from the course in your Electronic Writing Portfolio. Please make sure that you understand the EWP requirements and fulfill them in a timely way. You can find more information about the EWP at http://www.eiu.edu/~assess/.

PLAGIARISM The English Department's statement on plagiarism says that "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.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY Any breach of academic integrity—from cheating on a quiz to "getting ideas" from Spark Notes to submitting a wholly unoriginal essay—is a serious matter and will get you a serious penalty. The Judicial Affairs office recommends an F for the course.

You will also be required to take a course in ethics administered by Judicial Affairs, 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 (posted in classrooms) and should ask if you have any questions about quoting from and/or documenting sources. But because the work of the course is to be an expression of your own ideas in your own words (aside from words and ideas derived from the works we’re reading), 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 (numbers = weeks)

Reading in translation(s) (1)

Epic and anti-epic (2-11)
Homer, Iliad (2-4)
Homer, Odyssey (5-7)
Virgil, Aeneid (8)
Ovid, Metamorphoses (9)
Dante, Inferno (10-11)

Tragedy and comedy
Aeschylus, Oresteia (12-13)
Aristophanes, Lysistrata (14)

Lyric poetry
Sappho (15)