ENG 2205-002: Introduction to Literary Study

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Literature has been before us, wherever we go. When I come in the secretest recesses of a swamp, to some obscure, and rare, & to me unknown plant, I know that its name & the number of its stamens, every bract & awn, is carefully described & registered in a book in my shelf. So it is with this young soul wandering lonely, wistful, reserved, unfriended up and down in nature. These mysteries which he ponders, mortality, this drawing to love, this trembling balance of motive, and the centrality whereof these are rays, have all been explored to the recesses of consciousness, to the verge of Chaos and the Neant, by men with grander steadfastness & subtler organs of search than any now alive; so that when this tender philosopher comes from his reverie to literature, he is alarmed (like one whose secret has been betrayed) by the terrible fidelity, with which, men long before his day, have described all & much more than all he has just seen as new Continent in the West.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his journal, 1845

The purpose of this class is to help English majors, minors, and otherwise interested parties develop their own sense of the tools and techniques of literary appreciation and analysis to help them navigate through the world of literature as Emerson described it. How to read, what to read, why we should read, when should one go to the library to do research, when should one simply think about the book, whose opinion is right, what about all that criticism, how to deal with boredom, what does it mean to love books—these are the kinds of questions I want us thinking about. We won’t really answer them, but it’s the mulling them over that counts.

Class rules:
1. attendance counts; miss more than three classes, and you are in trouble
2. reading the material really counts; English majors who do not read are not English majors, and will also flunk the reading quizzes that I will give you from time to time
3. class participation is mandatory; talking about books is the essence of literary study, and learning to discuss, argue, and analyze out loud is a huge part of the game.
4. your overall grade for the course will be based on the quality of your written work and the degree to which you follow the rules of the class