ENG 2601-002: Backgrounds of Western Literature

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Course Description

Here is a description for "Backgrounds of Western Literature," according to the university website:

A reading of major world masterpieces through the Renaissance, works that have influenced literature in English, by such writers as Homer, Sappho, Sophocles, Plato, Virgil, Ovid, Marie de France, Dante, Rabelais, Cervantes. Required of English majors, open to others.

This class will introduce you to a few European works that for one reason or another became important to something called "the Western tradition." During the semester, I hope to familiarize you with some of the ideas of this "tradition," as well as question some of its assumptions. We cannot hope to survey the vast histories and literatures of the many cultures preceding the Renaissance (or, as it is often referred to today, the "Early Modern Period"). We can try, however, to gather a sense as to the enormity of philosophical, literary, and cultural achievement preexisting the modern world. In doing so, we must be prepared to encountered worlds and cultures that are very foreign to our own, while at the same time recognize that, despite this vast gulf of time, we may also meet up with surprisingly familiar ways of seeing the world. The documents we will read in this class—except the Shakespeare play—are both literally and figuratively translations. That is to say, these texts translate a very foreign world into a language accessible to us—not only into English, but also into a modern idiom that didn’t exist when they were written. We will try to recognize how reading practices (the way we and others read) participate in the creation of a meaningful text. During the semester, we will also consider how it came to pass that Western civilization became so influential and powerful through Jared Diamond’s account in Guns, Germs and Steel.

You will be expected to participate in our class discussions on a daily basis, so you must come to class having read the course material. Much of the reading will be extensive and difficult: you should count on at least five hours of reading per week.

We will begin with the three Theban plays of Sophocles, since they were written before everything else on our syllabus (fifth century B.C.E.), although we may pick up a poem or two from Sappho (seventh or sixth century B.C.E.) along the way. We will proceed more or less chronologically from there. A few of these texts will be in the Course Reader, bridging the large historical gap between Sophocles and Boccaccio.

Texts

Boccaccio, Giovanni. The Decameron. (1351)
Cervantes, Miguel de. Don Quijote. (1605)
Diamond, Jared. Guns, Germs and Steel.
Shakespeare, William. A Midsummer Night’s Dream. (1596)
Sophocles. The Theban Plays. Oedipus Rex (429-425 B.C.E.), Oedipus at Colonus (401 B.C.E.), Antigone (c.442 B.C.E.)


Course Reader, available after Labor Day at the Copy Shop in the Student Union.
Academic honesty: Students are responsible for knowing Eastern Illinois University regulations and policies regarding academic honesty. Plagiarism will likely result in your failing the course and in further action by the university. Here is 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 representation of them as one's own 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 assignments, of a grade of F for the assigned essay and a grade of F for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office.

Paper Policies

Papers—and all other assignments—are due at the beginning of class. Late papers will not be commented upon, and be marked a half grade lower for every class period late. Essays turned in a week past the deadline will be given a “zero.”

Your paper should be stapled and include page numbers. Format: 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, with one-inch margins.

Absence Policy:

When you are absent—especially when you are frequently absent—two things happen. First, your participation grade drops substantially. Second, you naturally fall behind in understanding course material and neither the class nor the Professor can catch you up on everything missed in a day’s class. YOU need to decide when it is absolutely necessary to miss class. Be wise. It bears repeating: you cannot make up missed work and late assignments will be penalized. Whether these are excused or unexcused absences does not matter for this course. The Professor does not need to have your absences documented or explained.

Emailing Policy:

I want to get to know you and your work this semester. Thus I ask that you call me or stop by my office during office hours (or scheduled times) so that we can talk. DO NOT EMAIL ME TO ASK FOR AN “UPDATE” ON MISSED ASSIGNMENTS, OR TO EXPLAIN AN ABSENCE. Working groups will be assigned so that you can contact group members for notes and missed work.

Requirements

All assignments and exams must be turned in to pass the course.

First Summary: due Wednesday, 06 September (5%)
Second Summary: due later in the semester (5%)
Quizzes: throughout the semester (10%)
Exams: Midterm, in week 7 (15%)
Final Exam, during finals week (25%)
Class Participation: see below (15%)
Summaries of Critical Works (2): at your discretion, before Week 12 (20%)—see below
Presentation of Summaries: ~ weeks 14-15 (5%)—see below
Final Paper: ~ five pages, due on Wednesday, 7 December (25%)

Quizzes (10%)

We will have quick, unannounced quizzes throughout the semester at the beginning of class. You cannot “make up” missed quizzes. Late in the semester, I will proctor one additional quiz for those who would like to compensate for having missed a quiz.

Summaries of Critical Works, and Presentation (5%, each)

By Week 12, you will have handed in summaries of two critical works (i.e., secondary sources) on any two of the works we will read in this course. These summaries should be no longer than two pages in length, double-spaced. I expect—and will assess you on—proper bibliographic citation (please refer to your reference handbook). You must hand in a copy of the summarized article with your assignment. In
the classes immediately following the Thanksgiving break. I will ask you to give a brief (five-minute?), formal presentation to the class on your two annotated works.

**Midterm and Final Exams (15 and 25%, respectively)**
The exams will verify your engagement with the class material through identification and short-answer questions. Before the first test, we will run through some example questions to familiarize you with my testing tendencies.

**Final Paper (30%)**
Using the two critical works you summarized (see above), you will fashion an argument connecting two of the readings in our course. At some point before the Thanksgiving break, you will submit a topic proposal to me, outlining an idea for your final paper. The sooner you begin work on your critical summaries, the sooner you can begin to think about essay topics, the sooner you can discuss with me your possibilities, and so on. I look forward to conferencing with you individually on your interests in the readings and for your paper.

**Class Participation (15%)**
There will be a number of required, yet ungraded assignments throughout the quarter, constituting a substantial portion your class-participation grade. I will expect you to come to class having read the material, and with questions or comments on the readings. Some of the course material may be quite tough slogging; you should pinpoint specific moments of reading difficulty, and query me (“test” me, if you will) about them. I will also provide a virtual forum for post-class discussion, likely through email. Attendance is not mandatory, but let me add this disclaimer. If you do not attend class without finding an extremely reliable notetaker, you will almost certainly fail the two exams, and your class-participation grade will suffer immensely. Since the final paper will be much easier to write after we discuss the reader materials, your grade for this assignment will likewise be compromised. You are, however, all adults and should be able to use your own judgment vis-à-vis attendance.

**Important disclaimers…**

**Conduct**
Instructors are responsible for maintaining order and a positive learning environment in the classroom. Students whose behavior is disruptive either to the instructor or to other students may be required to discontinue course activities and to cancel the course registration (or be disenrolled). In addition, students may be subject to disciplinary action.

**Grades**
Your instructor sets the requirements and grading criteria for specific assignments. Here are general standards for grades:

- **A** = Achievement that is outstanding and unique
- **B** = Achievement that is significantly above the level necessary to meet the requirements
- **C** = Assignment meets the basic requirements in every respect
- **D** = Assignment meets only some of the requirements and is worthy of credit
- **F** = Assignment does not substantially meet the basic requirements

For in-class or other brief writing assignments, you will be graded on a scale of \(^{+}\), \(^{\cdot}\), or \(^{-}\). Work that is strongly engaged and on-topic will receive a \(^{+}\). Satisfactory work that is on-topic will receive a \(^{\cdot}\). Work that shows little engagement or is off-topic will get a \(^{-}\).

**Incompletes**
Incompletes are not given except in the most extraordinary circumstances (e.g., medical emergency), which a student must be able to document, and only if just a small part of the course remains to be finished. The student and teacher must make a written agreement concerning the condition of the incomplete.

**Cell Phones**
All those caught not having turned off their cells and/or other electronic devices will be subject to relentless mockery, public shaming, and, if necessary, unimaginably medieval tortures.