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ENG 3009-011: Myth and Culture

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Course Description: Through comparative analysis of myths from selected cultural traditions, we will examine relationships among mythical, historical, anthropological, and scientific ways of understanding. We will be reading primary texts of myths as well as secondary criticism, and the class will consist of lecture and discussion based upon these readings.

Course Objectives:
- to break down cultural misunderstandings and barriers
- to recognize similarities among cultures
- to learn what myths are and how they function
- to learn about cultures that may be unfamiliar
- to learn more about our own cultures and mythologies
- to learn different ways of approaching and interpreting cultures and texts

Course Texts:
Dundes, A. Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth.
Dine bahanejí: The Navajo Creation Story.
The Epic of Gilgamesh.
Erdoes, R., & A. Ortiz, American Indian Myths and Legends.
Lhalungpa, L. The Life of Milarepa.
Ovid. Metamorphoses.

Grading: Unless otherwise specified in class, your grade will be based upon:
Three papers on assigned topics, approximately 4-5 pp. each, worth 25 points apiece
A mid-term exam worth 20 points
A final exam worth 25 points
Lively and substantive participation, possible quizzes or shorter written work, attendance, group work worth 30 points
Total: 150 points--135-150=A, 120-134=B, 105-119=C, 90-104=D, below 90=F.

Papers: Must be typed, double-spaced, in MLA style, and must be on the assigned topics. (Consult the Writing Center if you are unfamiliar with MLA style.) Late papers will be penalized.

Responsibilities and policies:
You must turn in ALL assigned writing to pass the course, as well as accumulating sufficient point totals.
Your written work for the course needs to be available as specified in the syllabus which you receive early in the semester.
Class discussion and quizzes or short discussion-oriented writing cannot be made up, as the sole purpose of these is to
assure readiness for the discussion that follows. If you're not here for the class discussion, the quiz is pointless.

Ground rules for discussion:
We offer our experience as our truth and agree to respect the experiences of the others in our class.
We acknowledge that our experience is limited, and that limited experience may cause us to draw shaky conclusions.
We agree actively to pursue information about the subjects we are studying, to avoid stereotypes, and to encourage thought.
We agree to share what we think and believe without demeaning or devaluing anyone else's experiences.
We agree to create an atmosphere in which everyone feels safe to discuss the material openly.

Academic honesty, research, written work etc:

I regard any violation of academic honesty including misappropriation of sources, unauthorized help, cheating on exams etc, with the utmost seriousness and will apply penalties severely. Students who transgress will certainly receive an F for the assignment. Cheating, plagiarism, and faulty documentation on papers and exams will most likely result in an F for the assignment, and probably an F for the course. ANY incident of academic dishonesty will be reported to Judicial Board.

Students with Disabilities: If you have a documented disability and wish to receive academic accommodation, please contact the coordinator of disability services (581-6583) as soon as possible.

Course assignments: You will receive an outline of assignments and due dates. Please keep up with it unless otherwise instructed, even if we are discussing something different in class.

PLEASE NOTE: Every effort has been made to spell out policies clearly. Some changes may occur in the normal course of any semester. For any alteration of assignment or policy, an announcement in class will be considered sufficient notice, so take care! Remaining in the course after these policies have been discussed and clarified signals that you have accepted them and agree to abide by them.

Course plan: The course will begin with a general discussion of what the terms "myth" and "culture" mean and will divide roughly into three units as follows:
1. Near Eastern and European myths, including Gilgamesh
2. Native American, including Mayan and Navajo
3. Buddhist and Hindu myths and legends, including a film version of the Mahabharata.

You will receive the first segment of the syllabus at least two weeks, and succeeding ones a week or two before we begin the material.
QUIZZES will be unannounced, may vary in format from identification to short essay, and may sometimes be replaced by brief in- or -out-of-class writing due the same day as the reading.

DISCUSSION questions and comments must be relevant and substantive, i.e. they must be about the reading and connections you are making with it. After the first two class days, discussion of procedural matters will be limited to the last five minutes or so of class. If you need help with a paper, make an appointment with me a reasonable time before the paper is due. If you have a question about a grade on a returned paper, take the paper home, re-read it, read my comments again, and then make an appointment with me.

GROUPS may be formed for discussion and projects. You may be asked to make a group presentation to the class. All group work is part of the regular class proceedings, and you are as responsible for it as for regular reading and class lecture/discussion.

Read the syllabus CAREFULLY and PAY ATTENTION to modifications. Under NO circumstances will "I read the wrong material" be acceptable as an excuse. Directions for preparation are quite specific early in the semester, less so as we move on, to allow us to take advantage of the sometimes unpredictable nature of discussion. Please note additional assignments such as short writings and handouts on your syllabus as they are given in class.

Schedule of classes and assignments for first segment of course:

Jan. 14 Introductions, diagnostic surveys, policies, course outline, brief in-class writing, discussion on meaning of terms "myth" and "symbol."

For next time, read in Sacred Narrative William Bascom's essay "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives," paying particular attention to his explanations of terminology. This essay helps us establish a vocabulary for talking about the subject of the course, and I will expect you to become fluent in it.

Jan. 16 Discussion of Bascom's essay and consideration of some familiar narratives which may or may not be myths. Further exploration of the term myth.

For next time: Read The Epic of Gilgamesh. Read the introduction and study the map too, but only AFTER you have read the story. Which parts of the narrative seem most familiar to you? Where in your own reading, movie-going, tv-watching etc. have you run into similar patterns?


For next time: Write a page or so in which you respond to and give your reactions to the first few days' discussion, reading, and
lecture. Focus on what seems most important to you about what we’ve done, on questions you may have, and on parts of the discussion which might have seemed irrelevant and whose connection to the basic material of the course you would like to see established more clearly. (While typing these is not a requirement as it is for papers, typing would certainly enable me to read and respond to them more quickly.) Review Gilgamesh to stay fresh for class discussion.


For next time: read Primal Myths, "Introduction" (1-30) and "Ancient Egyptian Myths" (77-90). Be forewarned that these are often fragmentary, and in one case you will be reading an interlinear translation of hieroglyphics. Your patience will, however, be rewarded with some--ahem--most interesting views of creation.

Jan. 28 Conclusion of Gilgamesh and introduction to Egyptian myths, with a discussion of how myths help shape and reflect the cultures that produce them, and some of the problems in interpreting myths across cultures. Time permitting, a videotape of "Darmok," an episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation which contains some interesting insights for students of myth and culture in general and students of Gilgamesh in particular.

For next time: review "Ancient Egyptian Myths" for further discussion.

Jan. 30 Continue discussion of "Ancient Egyptian Myths."

For next time: read Primal Myths, "Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian Myths" (91-122). Note patterns of similarity and difference to previous reading. Work on papers.

Feb. 4 Discuss "Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian Myths".

For next time: review reading to stay fresh for discussion, Work on paper topics.

Feb. 6 Continue discussion of "Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian Myths."

For next time: Ovid’s Metamorphoses Books I and II. (Please note we will be doing III and IV for the class meeting after, so it might be wise to read ahead. I hope you will find parts of this reading very funny.) CONTINUE WORKING ON PAPERS.

Feb. 11 The Romans as "culture thieves"--ah, make that assimilators--discussion of Metamorphoses Books I and II.

For next time: Metamorphoses Books III and IV.

Feb. 13 Metamorphoses Books III and IV. Wrap up Near Eastern and European, and begin consideration of myths of the Americas, concentrating on Mayan and Navajo.

For next time: Handouts and finish paper.
February 20  Finish watching Clash of the Titans and discuss Roman mythology and contemporary uses of myth. For next time, in Primal Myths read the selections from Mayan mythology "From the Popul Vuh" beginning on p. 287 and "Our Father God" beginning on p. 298.

February 25 Discuss Mayan myth and culture; for next time, read selection on handouts. Introduction of next paper topic.

February 27 Discuss handouts, including role of translation in affecting our interpretation of other cultures. As time permits, a video version of the Popul Vuh. Begin presentation of preparations for mid-term exam, which will take place on March 6. If you wish to read ahead, you may begin the Dine' Bahane': The Navajo Creation Story. For next time, work on mid-term preparations.

March 3  Artistic representations of Mayan culture, effects of world mythology on art in Western culture. Introduction of possible short-answer items for mid-term exam. For next time, finalize mid-term preparation.

March 6  Mid-term exam, full period. For next time, read Dine' Bahane', "Introduction" and "Part One: The Emergence." Make a list of vocabulary words you feel you need help with in order to understand fully what you are reading.

March 11-13 Discuss Dine' Bahane' Part One, focusing on what the story reveals about Navajo culture. For week after break, read "Part Two: The Fifth World" (81-168). Again, make a list of vocabulary words.

March 18 and 20  Spring break. Enjoy, but don't forget to work on papers and keep up with reading.

March 25-27. Discuss Dine' Bahane' Part Two and Navajo imagery, including sand paintings, and sacred ceremonials. Navajo belief as reflected in contemporary popular culture (see handouts to be given on Mar. 25.) For April 1. Dine' Bahane' "Part Three: Slaying the Monsters" (171-278).

April 1-3 Conclude discussion of Dine' Bahane'; second papers due Thursday April 3.

You will, at this time, receive the final third of your syllabus, incorporating Buddhism and Hinduism. You will be reading the Life of Milarepa and selections from Hindu works. There are arrangements pending for guest speakers. And you will be working on your third (and last!) paper and getting ready for the final exam. If time permits, there will be a brief video on the contemporary practice of Tibetan Buddhist medicine, and we will be looking at a film adaptation of the great Hindu epic The Mahabharata.
English 3009 Syllabus Part III Buddhism and Hinduism

REMINDER: Your second paper is due on Thursday April 17, with an automatic extension to Tuesday April 22 for anyone who needs it, but be careful, because you will also be working on your third (and shortest) paper.

For next class meeting: read Life of Milarepa, First Part—birth, youth, misdeeds, and second part through to the end of the second chapter titled "Ordeals"

April 6 (Sunday) Myth and Culture Film Fest at 1320 Monroe start times are approximate:
- Star Wars 12:30
- Apollo 13 2:45
- Princess Bride 5:15
- Terminator 2 (director's cut) 7:30

Pizza break at about 6:00. Some snacks and soft drinks provided, but feel free to bring anything you'd like (except for alcoholic beverages—NO EXCEPTIONS.)

Remember, this is a preparatory activity for the paper, so questions, discussion, and notetaking will be welcome, but I hope you'll also have a good time. Kinds of questions you might consider: Who is (are) the hero(es) of Apollo 13. As a story, does it have more in common with the story of Perseus from Ovid's Metamorphoses or the story of the people in the Dine Bahane? Are Darth Vader and Gilgamesh alike in any way? How are the machines in the opening scenes from Terminator 2 like the Lords of Death in Xibalbe from the Popul Vuh? Do any of these stories have trickster characters like, say, Coyote?

April 8 Begin discussion of Buddhism and The Life of Milarepa. We will have a guest lecturer, Dr. Duangrudi Suksang, to introduce us to some basic concepts in Buddhist thought. Introduce last paper topic.

April 10 Continue discussion of Life of Milarepa. for next week Third Chapter, "Initiations and Instructions" through to the end of "Nirvana," work on papers.

April 15 Continue discussion of Milarepa, work on papers.

April 17 Conclude discussion of Milarepa, turn in second papers unless you're taking the extension.

April 22 Turn in papers if you took the extension. Begin discussion of Hinduism and the Mahabharata (on videos and handouts). Guest lecturer: Dr. Jyoti Panjwani.

April 24 Continue discussion of Hinduism and the Mahabharata.

April 29 Continue discussion of Hinduism and the Mahabharata.
(continued on reverse.)
May 1 Conclude "", tie it all together, turn in last paper (no exceptions.) Review for final.

Final exam: Wednesday, May 7 from 2:45 to 4:45 in Room 318 CH.

Have a Golden Age of a summer!