ENG 3009G-001-002: Myth and Culture

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We often use the word *myth* quite casually, to dismiss a story or assertion as false ("That's just a myth"). The work of this course will offer ways to think about myth as just the opposite—as a matter of powerful (though not objective) truth, a significant narrative that shapes a culture's sense of life in deep, fundamental ways. Myth, after all, is what someone believes. As we read, think, write, and talk about myth, we'll learn much about the past and about ourselves. Principal questions: How do mythic stories shape human cultures? What meanings did/do the particular texts we’re reading have for their cultures? What meanings might they have for us? Our reading will focus on the figure of the hero in different settings. We’ll read *Gilgamesh* (from ancient Mesopotamia, a combination of adventure story and spiritual quest), Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (from ancient Greece, epic poems of war and the journey back), and three stories of American questing and searching: Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

**TEXTS**

Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick*
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*
*Gilgamesh*, ed. N. K. Sandars
Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Stanley Lombardo
Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Stanley Lombardo
Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*

**REQUIREMENTS**

Dedicated participation in the daily work of the course (reading, thinking, discussing), quizzes, a number of writing assignments, a final examination.

**POLICIES**

**Attendance**

Attendance is essential: you should attend class as often as I do. You are responsible for all assignments, whether or not you are in class when they are announced. If you must miss a class, you should get in touch with me beforehand to find out what you will miss. (Don’t hesitate to call me at home if you need to; I don’t have voice mail for my office number.)
Late Work and Make-Up Work
Late writing assignments are acceptable only if you have my approval in advance. Missed quizzes cannot be made up. If you have a properly verified absence (illness, emergency, participation in an official University activity), I will 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
Coming in to talk can be a great way to engage in genuine intellectual dialogue. It can also be a great way to clear up questions and dissolve anxieties and get expert help with writing problems. Feel free to come in to talk—about a question that you didn’t get to ask in class, an idea that you want to discuss, a writing problem, an assignment, a grade, etc. If office hours aren’t workable for you, talk to me and we can figure out another time. And when you come in, please don’t feel that you need to apologize for taking up my time. Having office hours is part of what a college prof does.

Decorum
Our purposes here are serious—not grim or morbid, but genuinely intellectual. No eating, talking, doing work for other classes, or other private business. Anyone who interrupts the work of the class on a continuing basis will be asked to leave.

Some Words About 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 “educed” 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 I try not to give those rote non-responses. Instead I try to engage what someone is saying. Sometimes a student’s comment will make me think of something I hadn’t thought to say.
before. Or I might ask a question—sometimes for the sake of debate, sometimes to look for a lengthier explanation (for instance, “What makes you see it that way?”). So if you say something and I then ask you a question, I’m doing so in the spirit of dialogue. (You should be asking me questions too.)

A few guidelines about discussion: Please raise your hand. If someone else gets recognized first and you still want to say something, just raise your hand again (don’t think that I’ve decided not to “call on” you). When I ask a question, I always try to look first for someone who hasn’t yet contributed before going to someone who’s already contributed.

If everyone comes in prepared to make some contribution to each discussion, we will have wonderful discussions. If you have general qualms about participating in class discussion, please talk to me as soon as possible. If at any point you have qualms about how things are going in class, please talk to me.

Grading
Your grade will be based on your written work (40%), quizzes (30%), final examination (20%), and participation (10%).

Short writing assignments receive letter grades. 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 informed participation), 85 (frequent informed participation), 75 (less frequent participation or less informed participation), 50 (only occasional participation), 0 (little or no participation). You may check on quizzes and participation at any time. To calculate semester grades, I use the following numerical equivalents for letter grades:

A 95  A- 92  B+ 87  B 85  B- 82  C+ 77  C 75  C- 72  D+ 67  D 65  D- 62  F 55

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.

Electronic Writing Portfolio
Myth and Culture is considered a “writing-intensive” General Education course. If you wish to include an essay from the course in your electronic writing portfolio, the deadline for Fall 2002 submissions is November 22. I will review submissions through November 8. Your portfolio is your responsibility; please make sure that you understand the requirements and fulfill them in a timely way. You can find more information about the electronic writing portfolio at http://www.eiu.edu/~assess/.

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 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 Cliffs Notes to cutting and pasting Internet material to working with another student on an essay—is a serious matter and will get you a serious penalty, up to and including an F for the course. You will also get a file in the Judicial Affairs office and be required to participate in an ethics workshop organized by Judicial Affairs. 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 since 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 have someone “go over” your 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**

Week 1: Introduction to the course
Weeks 1-2: Gilgamesh
Weeks 3-5: Iliad, Achilles in Vietnam
Weeks 5-10: Odyssey
Weeks 10-11: Ragged Dick
Weeks 11-14: Invisible Man
Weeks 14-15: Their Eyes Were Watching God