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Religion and Literature

Instructor

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Institution

New York University, a large private university

Course Level and Type

Undergraduate; open enrollment (freshmen to senior); a lecture course

Enrolment and Year Last Taught

43 students; spring 1998

Reading List

1. Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* (c. 427 B.C.E.) and *Oedipus at Colonus* (22 years later)
2. Euripides, *The Bacchae* (c. 407 B.C.E.)
3. Selections from the Hebrew Bible
4. Selections from the New Testament
5. Shakespeare, *King Lear* (1605)
6. Melville, *Moby-Dick or, The White Whale* (1851)
7. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886) and "Master and Man" (1895)
8. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (1864) and "The Grand Inquisitor" (1880)
9. Kafka, *The Complete Stories* (1904–24), selections
10. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (1949)

Don't be alarmed by appearances: there is an average of 53 pages of reading per meeting. All the texts are available for purchase at the NYU Book Center and on reserve at Bobst Library. Bibles galore are located in the reference section at call numbers BS 180–190. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible is the one most widely accepted for academic use, but if you have a favorite version you are welcome to use it.

Course Requirements

1. Do the readings according to schedule.
2. Write a concise, thoughtful short paper (1 page) on 8 of the 10 assigned texts (8 one-page papers in total), due in class throughout the term. See "On the Writing Assignments" below for due dates.
3. Write a longer paper (5 pages minimum) exploring a religious or theological theme in one or more of the texts we read, due May 5.
4. Meet with me at least once during the term.
5. Take the in-class final exam.

Schedule of Readings

1. January 20: Introduction to the course
2. January 22: Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*
3. January 27: Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*
4. January 29: Sophocles' *Oedipus* plays (further discussion)
5. February 3: Euripides, *The Bacchae*
6. February 5: Euripides, *The Bacchae* (further discussion)
7. February 10: Selections from the Hebrew Bible:
Isaiah 1–12 and 28–29 (parts of First Isaiah); 52–55 (part of Second Isaiah)
Psalms 14, 19, 22, 23, 104, 146 (read each twice)
The Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon (read at least half)
8. February 12: Selections from the Hebrew Bible:
Ecclesiastes, or the Preacher
Lamentations
9. February 17: Selections from the Hebrew Bible:
The Book of Job
10. February 19: Selections from the New Testament:
The Gospel according to Mark
The Gospel according to Matthew 5:1–7:28 (The Sermon on the Mount)
The Gospel according to John 1:1–18 (the Prologue) (read twice)
11. February 24: Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Acts 1–2)
12. February 26: Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Acts 3–5)
13. March 3: Shakespeare, *King Lear* (further discussion); meanwhile, read *Moby-Dick*, pp. 1–77
14. March 5: *Moby-Dick*, pp. 78–170
15. March 10: *Moby-Dick*, pp. 170–247
16. March 12: *Moby-Dick*, pp. 247–328

[March 17 & 19: Spring Recess, no class]

17. March 24: *Moby-Dick*, pp. 328–405
18. March 26: *Moby-Dick*, pp. 405–470
19. March 31: Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*
20. April 2: Tolstoy, "Master and Man"
21. April 7: Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (pp. 1–82)
22. April 9: Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (pp. 82–153)
23. April 14: Dostoevsky, "The Grand Inquisitor"
24. April 16: Kafka, *The Complete Stories*:
"Two Introductory Parables," pp. 3–5; "Description of a Struggle," pp. 9–51;
"The Judgment," pp. 77–88; "The Hunter Gracchus," pp. 226–34;
"The Hunger Artist," pp. 268–77
25. April 21: Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, pp. 379–417
26. April 23: Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, pp. 418–457
27. April 28: Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*
28. April 30: Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (further discussion)

About the Writing Assignments

The One-Page Papers

As we go through the readings, you are to write 8 concise, concentrated, and thoughtful short papers on 8 of the 10 assigned authors. Each paper is to be 1 page minimum in length (double-spaced with normal margins).

This means that by the last meeting of the class you will have handed in 8 short papers totaling 8 pages or more. You may skip writing on 2 of the authors, so try to skip those that interest you least; but everyone must write a short paper on either Sophocles or Euripides.

The challenge of the short paper: The paper should read like a brief, vigorous plunge into deep waters. Focus on the text, but do not spend time simply summarizing what the text says. I want you to address a fundamental theme, passage, or character(s) in the text: what does it mean, or seem to mean, and how does it convey this meaning? The theme should be fundamental enough that it approaches a religious or quasi-religious dimension, but you need not refer explicitly to religion. Choose an aspect of the text that "sticks like a burr on your conscience," then explore it using your perceptivity, intelligence, and creativity. Attention to the author's use of language, metaphor, mood, etc.; is always appropriate; so is prudent use of quotations.

The importance of rewriting: After you have finished a draft of your paper, take a good look at the result. Is it a thoughtful embodiment of your theme, or is it sloppy and facile? (Sloppy thinking and sloppy use of language often go together.) Probe and question what you have written. Critique it as though you were editing it for someone else. Have you reached some real depth or subtlety in your treatment? Can you rework the paper to make it more unified? convincing? powerful? Can you cut superfluous sentences or needless words? Rework your paper as though you were creating a gem, a diamond. Write a paper that impresses you.

Make-up papers: If you do not hand in a short paper on the day it is due, I will accept a make-up paper, but it must be longer (2 pages) and high quality.

The Term Paper

You are to write a longer paper, 5 pages minimum (typed/printed, double-spaced, with normal margins) exploring a religious or theological theme in one or more of the texts treated in the course. It may be an intensive study of a theme in one text, or a comparative treatment of a theme in two or more texts. It is a good idea to discuss your topic with me, unless you are especially independent-minded. You are welcome to discuss your vague ideas with me, before your topic takes a definite shape; if you have trouble deciding on a topic, I will be happy to help.

The importance of rewriting: Read "The importance of rewriting" above. Practice on the short papers should help you with writing and rewriting this longer paper. Your final grade for the course will depend more on the quality of your papers than on how you perform on the final exam.

Pedagogical Reflections

I worked hard to convey to the class some inkling of the radically different historical worlds that we were encountering through each of these literary texts, which, I insisted, cannot be deeply read without some minimal grasp of cultural-historical context: e.g., the ritual-formal dimension of ancient Greek tragedy, the microcosmic symbolism of Shakespeare's Globe Theater, the odd Calvinist-pantheist ground of Melville's America. The secret endeavor of the course was to teach young people how to imagine themselves into historical worlds that are radically different from their own—worlds long disappeared from the face of the earth, yet still accessible as living realities through texts. This course worked well except for Moby-Dick, which was very difficult to teach (I think I failed completely); it inspired a glowingly passionate response in a tiny minority and groaning resentment (for the length) in all the rest. The students responded most spontaneously to Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Kafka, and Beckett, and it seemed apparent to me that this was because their cultural worlds are closest to ours today, therefore they could relate without much struggle. But what I am most proud of is precisely the struggle I put them through—with Sophocles, Euripides, the Bible, Shakespeare, and Melville.

Select a location 

http://www.wlu.ca/~wwwaar/syllabi/religion_and_literature-mccullough.html

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