

Department: Modern & Classical Languages

Course No.: 101

Credits: 3

Title: Classics of World Literature

Contact: Lucy S. McNeece

Content Area: CA1 Art and Humanities

Diversity: CA4 Diversity and Multiculturalism International

Catalog Copy: -101. Classics of World Literature I Either semester. Three credits. Introduction to classics of world literature. Comparative approach to canonical works of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, as well as Europe, from antiquity to the early modern period (1600).

Course Information: -This course introduces students to the literatures and cultures of the Ancient World, through close readings of texts (Epics, Poetry, Drama, Philosophy) selected from Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, Greece, Rome, Mexico, the Near East, Persia, China and Japan. Students examine the development of early forms of writing and the historical reasons for divergent cultural systems. Students are given a comparative, interdisciplinary approach to literature and culture leading them to appreciate distinctions between different aesthetic traditions and different forms of thought, and helping them to understand the interactions between material conditions, socio-political ideology, religious belief and artistic expression.

b. Course requirements: Students read selected texts each week (Epic, poetry, drama, philosophy) and are expected to participate actively in class and in discussion groups, for it is reflected in 25% of their grade. They are encouraged to enter imaginatively into situations based on historical material provided on the cultures being studied, and to reflect upon their own cultural legacy. (For example, to compare the conception of leadership outlined in the Epic of Gilgamesh with that of the Odyssey or the Analects, or to compare the ethical vision of Rumi's religious poetry with that of Saint Augustine.) There are four quizzes (short essays) and a final paper as well as a mid-term and a final exam.

Meets Goals of Gen Ed.: -1. Become articulate: Despite the large numbers of students, this course engages students regularly in interactive discussion. It extends to quizzes and exams: there are no multiple choice questions and students are called upon regularly in the lectures. Their self-expression is coached both orally and in their writing.

2. Acquire intellectual breadth and versatility: The entire course is predicated on the importance of exposing students to traditions and ideas that are distant from their own. Of course, they discover that once they learn to suspend their own preconceptions, that many elements of what they assume to be "Western" have their sources in the East.

3. Acquire critical judgment: All of the material in this course is presented as material for debate from different points of view. Even basic interpretation of the texts is discussed in detail, because many of the texts are remote in both time and cultural tradition for our students. Students therefore are obliged to question their own categories and responses to the literary language and this is reflected in their writing where they must make a case for their point of view.

4. Acquire moral sensitivity: Exposing students to unfamiliar beliefs, values and language-use sometimes provokes disdain as compensation for the experience of disorientation, which is nonetheless an imperative stage in the journey towards self-knowledge and compassion. Moral sensitivity is central to this course's goals, for the very reason that so much moral violence issues from either fear of the unfamiliar or simple ignorance. Encouraging students to perceive analogies as well as to look at the relations between history and human ideals helps students to understand why people believe or behave the way they do rather than to move quickly to judgment. Students learn that stereotypes must be understood as part of the libidinal economy of the culture, and that they function to preserve certain relations of power.

5. Acquire awareness of their era and society: The course teaches students to become conscious of how literary forms of expression reflect developments in other realms of culture, using a comparative approach. Students are constantly required to reflect upon analogous phenomena from their own experience or in U.S. and European culture. In addition, they are made aware of the evolution of traditions over time, through a range of historical mutations. Students learn that the values they believed to be absolute or universal are in fact the product of concrete, material processes. Finally, students are encouraged frequently to look at their own lives and imagine being observed by someone from a very different tradition. This is done by imaginative oral and written exercises (Example: In the complex and controversial history of the pharaoh Akhenaten's heresy, students imagined (written) a dialogue between any two of the six or seven known players in the story (Horeheb, Nefertiti, Myriam, Tighe, the Priests, etc.), and were encouraged to record a moment of a dramatic conflict. They could invent, but only within what would be consistent with what is known to be true, etc.) Such an assignment cannot be downloaded from any website, and develops both empathy and logic.

6. Acquire consciousness of the diversity of human experience: It should be clear that this course has such awareness as a primary objective. The course is designed to put into relation the writings of extremely diverse traditions precisely because, in this era of instant globalization, it is too easy for our students to assume that the American Way is superior because dominant, and that there is no reason to pay any attention to others. (We have all heard this, incredibly.) So this course attempts to show that in our system there is some space between the realities and the ideals inscribed in our founding documents, and that our superiority owes a great debt to cultures we have learned (in school!) to disdain. The fact, for example, that in the Chuang Tze, Chuang Chou uttered, long before Christians did, the idea that "One should try not to do to others what one would not like to have others do to one" gave many students a moment of incredulous pause. But how is this possible?! The conclusion they are obliged to reach involves a profound re-arrangement of their values. What if women's roles in a culture that we consider primitive were more actively involved with power and decision-making than women were in the West/U.S until very recently? Many stereotypes do not survive.

7. Acquire a working understanding of the processes by which they can continue to acquire and use knowledge: The students in this course are being coached to look at things from more than one point of view. The exercises in imaginative and critical thinking in fact surpass the content of the course in importance, and they (hopefully) are carried with them when they leave. One of several signs of the success of the approach used in this class (normally never tried with so many students) is the number of students who have come to ask for more references on, for example, the Egyptian hieroglyphs or on some other aspect of Hinduism, etc. These were unrelated to any final paper; they reflect the better students' involvement in the material.

CA1 Criteria: -This course examines literary expressions from a range of traditions as testimony of these cultures' developmental itineraries. One of the first questions asked of the students is, Why study literature when we can look at official histories? The course argues that literary expression gives us a window on cultural processes that is often excluded from official history, which, as we know, is written by those in power. But it also asks them to consider a different function for literature than the one it has today in many industrialized cultures. The course demonstrates that the study of literature encourages us to imagine ourselves in the place of the people it describes: instead of being what Pascal and others before and after him have described as a dangerous fiction, literature emerges in this course as a key to the discovery of a wealth of information about remote (and some supposedly familiar) cultures that is accessible by no other means. So we might say that the course makes a case for the seriousness of literature as a mode of knowledge that the spirit of science since the Enlightenment has entreated us, at the very least, to underestimate.

CA4 Criteria: -The texts and cultures studied necessitate a questioning of meta-discursive concepts, which, if taken to their logical conclusion, reveal the partially arbitrary nature of our research models themselves. So the course operates simultaneously on several levels: it provides historical information on a wide range of cultures which have been absent traditionally even from Ivy League curricula except as ghettos or tokens of multiculturalism; it claims a certain scientific value for literary expression as a means for understanding different ways of being in the world, or of knowing about it (epistemologies); and third, it employs a methodology for teaching which actively and concretely applies principles which enhance imaginative awareness of unfamiliar subjects, many of which our students know only in a trivialized, folkloric form as exotic commodities for consumption.

Role of Grad Students: -Role of graduate assistants in the course: Graduate Assistants hold weekly discussion sections and grade the work of these students. Faculty meets regularly with assistants for planning discussions and oversees all grading.