

Introduction to Literature: Pursuit of Happiness

This course introduces students to fiction, poetry, and drama, and emphasizes active and responsive reading. The single most important objective of the course is to foster pleasure in reading, and an understanding that real literature can be enjoyed for its ability to provide us with the experience of walking for a while in someone else's shoes. The focus of the course is the general theme of "the pursuit of happiness."

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Required Texts

Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Norton Critical Edition

Douglas Hunt, *The Riverside Anthology of Literature*, 3rd ed., containing:

Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*

Shakespeare, *Othello*

Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*

Short stories: Hemingway, "Soldier's Home"; Wright, "Big Black Good Man"; Cisneros, "Woman Hollering Creek"; Welty, "Livvie"; and Carver, "Cathedral"

Poetry by Shakespeare, Marvell, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Browning, Whitman, Dickinson, Hopkins, Yeats, Robinson, Frost, Eliot, Millay, Hughes, Cullen, Neruda, Auden, Thomas, Heaney, and Lee

The *American Heritage College Dictionary* (or equivalent desk dictionary)

A grammar handbook

Notes on the Curriculum of This Course

Students

Because this is an introductory course, students are typically unsophisticated readers in their first or second semester of college. At the top of the class will be a few students, some much older than the others, and some who are sophisticated students with a good background in literature. At the bottom of the class will be a few students who have literally never read a book voluntarily, and whose experience of fiction consists entirely of TV and movies. They have all, however, chosen this course over other options, so to some extent, the course could be considered an elective. Thus the readings chosen, especially at the beginning of the course, tend to be less demanding than one would choose for, say, a World Masterpieces or other 200-level survey of literature. After the first few weeks, however, I assume that the students who are not going to be able to succeed will have moved on, and by week four, we are in a full blown, rigorous, college literature course. For better students, a good deal of freedom is incorporated into the reading responses and papers to allow an opportunity to choose works off the syllabus that may be more challenging or that speak particularly to them.

Objectives

As already stated, the single most important objective of the course is to foster pleasure in reading, and an understanding that real literature can be enjoyed for its ability to provide us with the experience of walking for a while in someone else's shoes. For this reason, in the fiction and drama sections of the course, I focus most strongly on character, and in the poetry section, most strongly on how the poet's words create emotion in the reader. Not only does this approach serve the main purpose, but it is in the best humanistic tradition. Secondly, I want the students to learn the discipline of literary analysis—the vocabulary, structures, and writerly techniques—to fulfill the requirements of the course and to make them not only more thoughtful readers, but also more thoughtful viewers of movies and television. I have found, however, that if one puts pleasure in reading first, students will gladly learn the more technical aspects of the discipline, will retain the course better, and this is especially so in teaching poetry.

Theme

Incorporating the theme of “the pursuit of happiness” is particularly easy in this course. Every character in every story and play is seeking happiness one way or another, whether it's Iago indulging his evil nature or Livvie caring for old Solomon and being swept away by Cash. Without hammering too hard on the theme, I like to get the students involved in discussions about the consequences of the characters' decisions for their happiness. In the poetry section, we can easily analyze how, and why, particular poems fill us with joy, and thus, perhaps the relationship between art and happiness. To simplify matters for the students, I “prime” them at the beginning of the course with Aristotle's thoughts on “the Good” and how the Virtues tend to produce happiness. Here in Colorado, religion is a very touchy subject indeed, but I find all the students can discuss Aristotle with pleasure and relief.

I use excerpts from the Great Books Syntopicon essay on Happiness, and a selection from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* that discusses how the Good and the Virtues tend to produce happiness. Because the students at this level of coursework tend to buy the conventional wisdom that either there isn't any such thing as Good, or that everyone's idea of Good is different and equally valid (or both!), I

tend to force the students to work out a list of what would be needed for a good life. I write the list they generate on the board, get them to copy it down themselves, and *then* assign the reading in Aristotle and the Syntopicon. Usually they're amazed at how close their list matches, and the exercise immediately gets them thinking about the relationships between the good life, happiness, pleasure, love, wealth, and virtue around which the course is built.

Texts

I have chosen Hunt's *Riverside Anthology* mainly because of its approach to poetry and the authors' commentary in the short story and drama collections. Other texts I've enjoyed, and which contain enough Great Books authors to qualify for the course, are the *Norton Introduction to Literature* and Birkert's *Evolving Canon* (sadly, I believe, not scheduled for a new edition. The title is misleading: it contains at least as many Great Books authors than the other two texts, but features less well-known works by those authors—a refreshment for those of us who believe, for instance, that Faulkner wrote many fine stories besides "A Rose for Emily.") Though its selections can't be beat, I've never used Roberts and Jacobs's *Literature* because I find it too apparatus-heavy for my students.

This was my first time teaching *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and I won't pretend I was confident. I considered a great many works before choosing it: *Joseph Andrews*, *Passage to India*, *Lolita*, *Moll Flanders*, *My Antonia*, *Hard Times*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *Madame Bovary*, to name a few. In fact, a week before the semester started, I had *definitely* settled on *Joseph Andrews* for several reasons, but after discussions with my daughter (age 26) and several very good former students, I switched abruptly to *The Mayor of Casterbridge* only barely in time to order the book! I could not be more pleased that I did so: the students *absolutely loved* this book. Unanimously. Without prompting. On the first day of teaching it, *every student* in the class had read the whole book, not just the eight chapters assigned. Two students read it three times, and one read it twice. The young men were enchanted with Henchard—for them he embodied the terrible dilemma of manhood: the need to be strong enough to take care of everybody, and the need to be kind, and the terrible price to one's own *happiness* if one messes up. The young women found Henchard hard to like, but easy to love, and clearly understood why Elizabeth Jane and Farfrae were able to achieve *happiness*, while Henchard was not.

I chose the Norton Critical Edition of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, which has notes at the bottom of the pages (unlike the Penguin and Oxford editions, in which the notes are at the end), and this turned out to be an excellent choice, which I would highly recommend. Also splendid was the terrific set of original illustrations by Robert Barnes that can be downloaded at www.victoriaweb.uk.co.

Course Requirements

Student Performance Objectives

The students in the course will, in oral and written discussion:

- illustrate how literature interprets and informs the human condition; inspires new ways of thinking about one's fellow man; and gives pleasure to its readers.
- identify and explore universal themes, topics, and patterns of works studied.
- identify and apply basic structural elements of prose fiction, poetry and drama.

- demonstrate an understanding of basic cultural and historical contexts of works studied and their relevance to contemporary American culture.

Reading Responses

The five reading responses (33 points each) are required at the beginning of the classes for which they are due. Students may hand-write legibly or type these in an informal style; however they must be carefully prepared and proofread. They need not be more than a page. Please see "Reading Responses" below for suggestions. I will usually return graded responses to students before a paper is due, but they should keep a copy for their own reference and to help them prepare their formal papers.

Formal Papers and Assessment Essay

Students must complete two papers (100 points each), the final examination (100 points), and the assessment essay (35 points) in order to pass the course. These formal papers must be prepared carefully and thoughtfully according to the guidelines handed out in class. Grading criteria will include the quality with which students fulfilled the assignment, organization, and care in presentation. Papers must be double-spaced and typewritten. Of course, students will proofread the paper before submitting it. MLA manuscript and documentation style can be found in any grammar handbook.

Paper extension. Papers are due on the date announced; students may request *one* extension; they *must* request an extension before the paper is due. No second extensions or late papers will be accepted.

How to Figure Your Grade

The 500 points for the course will be distributed as follows: Two of three papers and assessment essay, 235 points; five of six reading responses entries, 33 points each; one final exam, 100 points. The final grade will be your total points earned divided by the 500 possible points expressed as a percentage (e.g.: 90–100% = A; 80–89% = B; 70–79% = C, etc.). *Always* keep your graded papers and reading responses. You should maintain a record of the number of points you have earned in order to track your average.

Plagiarism

In this course, we will be working extensively with other people's ideas. Whenever we use the ideas of others, we are required by ethics, fair practice, and good manners to attribute those ideas to their authors (as described by MLA documentation style in any grammar handbook, or as I suggest in class). Failure to do so will result in dismissal from, and a failing grade for, the course.

Attendance

Research shows that students who prepare for, attend, and participate in class earn significantly higher grades than those who do not; therefore, excessive absences or attending unprepared will result in lower grades or even failure. Students whose absences exceed 200 minutes should withdraw from the course; if you are absent for two consecutive classes, I will assume you have withdrawn unless I hear from you otherwise.

Syllabus

This course is divided into three sections: prose fiction, drama, and poetry.

August 29 and 31: Introduction

Read the selection on “Happiness” from the *Syntopicon*, and the discussion of “The Good” in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. Define the function of literature in Aristotelian terms (to instruct, to enlighten, and to give pleasure) as a way of pursuing happiness. Discuss the role of art and literature in the good life..

September 7–October 5: Prose Fiction: Short Story to Novel

In reading responses and class discussion, survey the history of storytelling; analyze plot, character, point of view, setting, symbolism, and theme.

Reading for classes 1–5, September 7–20 (in *Riverside Anthology of Literature*): “Fiction: Tales and Portraits” (pp. 4–21); Hemingway, “Soldier’s Home”; Wright, “Big Black Good Man”; Cisneros, “Woman Hollering Creek”; Welty, “Livvie”; and Carver, “Cathedral.”

Classes 6–10, September 21–October 5: Read *Mayor of Casterbridge*. Consider late Victorian ideas of propriety and the roles of men and women, and how they affect the ability to live a good life. Reading responses due September 19 and 28; three- to five-page paper due October 10.

October 10–November 7: Drama

In reading responses and class discussion, consider the Renaissance and modern literary periods, analyze stagecraft, character, structure, and theme. We will spend about three classes on each play.

Read *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles. Consider Greek drama, tragedy; The Aristotelian virtues, Greek ideas of fate and the actions of the gods and seers; and the Festival of Dionysus.

Read *Othello* by Shakespeare. Consider classical humanism, Elizabethan theater, and Shakespeare’s worldview.

Read *The Cherry Orchard* by Chekhov. Consider classical comedy vs. modern comedy, Chekhov’s background, and a brief survey of nineteenth-century Russian politics.

Students will be required to view each of these plays on videotape or DVD in addition to reading them. Reading responses due October 17 and 31; three- to five-page paper due November 14.

November 9–December 12: Poetry

In reading responses and class discussion, consider the romantic, modern, and postmodern literary periods; analyze the use of language (imagery, compression, ambiguity), sound (rhyme, alliteration, rhythm), structure (line length and meter), and form on poetry’s emotional impact. Poets we’ll read will include Shakespeare, Marvell, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Browning, Whitman, Dickinson, Hopkins, Yeats, Robinson, Frost, Eliot, Millay, Hughes, Cullen, Neruda, Auden, Thomas, Heaney, and Lee. Students will be invited to explore the work of other poets in the *Riverside* anthology in their reading responses and papers. A special syllabus will be handed out in class.

Reading responses due November 21 and December 5; three- to five-page paper due December 12.

December 19

Comprehensive final exam; assessment essay due.

Essay Papers

The students usually develop these five-page papers from their notes and reading responses. They are formally written and are intended to be read by others. Essayists present a thesis that is a thematic idea they see in a work and then discuss it using the relevant elements, such as character, poetics, symbolism, and language choices, for support. Essayists can also draw on other sources, such as the author's aesthetic theory, influences, or historical context to throw more light on the work, but the focus of the essay is the work itself. In the process, the essayist explains why the thematic idea is a reasonable one for that particular work, how it illuminates the work's meaning, or how it connects the work to human concerns.

Sample Topics for Papers

1. Compare Othello and Oedipus: Though their tragedies arise from different tragic flaws, what do they have in common? What effect does the working-out of their flaws have on the well-being of their states and families?
2. If you have read (or wish to read) *Antigone*, trace the development of Creon as a character in both plays. Does he change? Is his motivation different in *Antigone* than it is in *Oedipus*? How is his concern for the welfare of the state related to the happiness of its citizens, and how does that concern affect Oedipus and Antigone as individuals?
3. What part does love play in our happiness? Choose two works that you think answer this question, and examine how each writer uses character and motivation; conflict and resolution; and setting or symbolism to communicate that answer.
4. Choose one poet from the anthology (other than those we've discussed in class) to examine in depth. Read a bit about your poet's life and times. In your paper, try to detect a common theme or idea that runs through the poet's work, and discuss how his or her poetic techniques with regard to language, sound, form, and style help to create that theme in several poems.

Reading Responses

Students write five one-page, informal, response-type papers. I provide a choice of topics for each paper, and usually they focus on a particular work or choice of works. Some reading responses require students to practice applying discipline concepts; others ask students to interpret or compare; often they incorporate the theme. This semester, starting with *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, I began providing a handout called "Things to think about while reading _____," and allowing students to write their reading responses on any of the topics that took their fancy. I found this to be a wonderful technique.

Usually I will give you a topic to explore for your readings. Reading responses should be 300 to 500 words long and, in addition to exploring the topic, may include your emotional reactions to the work (good? bad? boring? charming? profound? annoying? sad? angering? funny?) and some analysis of what in the work caused this reaction. Another possibility is to connect this work to your own life, your values, or to another work. You could include your questions about the text, and possible answers you might like to explore in a longer paper. Reading responses are informal, but they should be carefully prepared in complete sentences and paragraphs, using standard mechanics and grammar,

that develop your ideas coherently; they should not be lists of fragmentary reactions, like notes. They may be legibly handwritten or typed.

Example: Partial Response to “Heart of Darkness”

This story seemed very dark to me, and it's almost as if that makes it harder to understand. Sometimes Marlow just seems to talk on and on too long about the enigma and the river and the jungle. It seems like the whole story's an enigma. For instance, there's a long section before he meets Kurtz that I just couldn't follow. Maybe the story is supposed to be an enigma, too, like the river and jungle (and nature?). There are also parts that I think are just really beautiful, for instance his description of how the cannibals were so hungry and behaved with so much "restraint." Also, the beginning where the ship is floating in limbo between the tides and the river and horizon; the scene in the grove where all the slaves are dying; and the woman on the bank of the river. All the emotions seem to lead to the ideas of love for the natural world and a hatred of the Europeans who are raping it

I think this story is about the cruelty of colonialism. I think Kurtz is so horrible because Conrad wants us to see how horrible it is to go into somebody else's country and steal everything from them and make them into slaves. The story made me want to know more about African colonies, like the Congo and South Africa. I think that would have made the whole thing easier to understand. For instance, did people still buy slaves at the time of the story?

Notes and Marginalia

Besides essays and reader responses, students in this course also use notes and marginalia to develop a more satisfying understanding of their readings.

You should make notes for yourself to help you remember things you think of while you're reading, as well as to note ideas that occur to you about the reading. Some people keep a special reading notebook for this purpose, while others use three-by-five cards or post-it notes; most make notes right in their books (called "marginalia"). These notes are solely for oneself and often make little sense to other readers. Here are some examples of marginalia from my own copy of Conrad's "Heart of Darkness":

Knitter of black wool – Mme DuFarge/Death?

Setting at slack tide – between ebb and flow, between heaven and earth

Marlow tells inconclusive tales just like this one

Natural world = amoral; world of men = immoral

Conrad's belaboring the point here – We got it!

See Achebe's comment

Fresleven = free slaves

Enigma = "an intentionally obscure story the meaning of which can only be deciphered by the cleverness of the hearer" (*Am. Heritage*)

Other Materials

Audiotapes and CDs

Gielgud reading Shakespeare's sonnets

Poetry Speaks, an anthology of poets reading their own work

Closed on Account of Rabies, a very strange CD of rock musicians reading works by Edgar Allan Poe

Dylan Thomas: The Caedmon Collection, newly released on CDs

Writers Speak, NPR interviews with writers

Several other audio anthologies of authors reading their work

Videos/DVDs

As noted in the syllabus, I require students to view the plays we read in class whenever possible, especially the Shakespeare play. I order DVDs of any plays not currently in our library's collection and make a list of any versions of the plays available at Blockbuster, Netflix, public libraries, or other rental outlets. Plays that I own personally, I place on reserve. My colleagues and I organize one trip per semester to the Denver Center for the Performing Arts to see a play.

Though I know others disagree with me on this, I do not believe that any drama can be properly understood without experiencing a performance. Furthermore, freshman and sophomore students are usually surprised by how accessible Shakespeare's and Sophocles' plays are *if they watch a performance while reading the plays*.

Web Sites

I like to show students pictures of authors whenever possible, and to talk about the authors' lives. I get these mostly from Google.

"Victoria Web" (www.victoriaweb.co.uk) has a good look at Victorian life and mores, and wonderful original illustrations for Hardy's and Dickens' work. Students very much enjoyed seeing these as they read.

"Elizabethan World Picture"

http://www.mtsn.org.uk/staff/staffpages/cer/elizabethan_world_picture/fluddlist.htm) is a web site that explains some of the basics of Elizabethan thought, with good graphics, but in less detail than the Tillyard classic that I use in my Shakespeare course.