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Masterpieces of Literature: Ancient to Renaissance Pursuit of Happiness

This course examines significant writings in world literature from the classical, medieval, and Renaissance periods. It emphasizes careful reading and understanding of the works and their cultural backgrounds. We will read and discuss poems, plays, and essays by writers from the ancients through the Renaissance; examine the thoughts, beliefs, insights, and visions of those writers; and will come to understand, appreciate, and enjoy the works in both their own and contemporary contexts.

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Theme

The theme of this course is “the pursuit of happiness.” Most American college students are familiar with Thomas Jefferson’s statement that all individuals are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They may not, however, think about what the words mean. How does one pursue happiness? How have people in different cultures and at different times defined the term? What does government have to do with happiness anyway? Not everyone agrees! A few years ago, the international honor society of two-year colleges, Phi Theta

Kappa, selected as its interdisciplinary honors study topic “The Pursuit of Happiness: Conflicting Visions and Values,” highlighting the differences in individuals’ and cultures’ visions of happiness. Reading and discussing the insights of thinkers over the past twenty-five centuries into how people seek or achieve happiness is indeed a worthwhile theme to explore in Literature 201.

Goals and Objectives

The major objectives of this course are:

1. To familiarize students with significant writings of the periods studied
2. To point up important contributions to Western civilization by some of the world’s great writers
3. To demonstrate the progression of artistic and literary achievement in Western civilization
4. To examine how literature influences and reflects the ideas, social customs, and political and economic history of each period
5. To provide opportunities for students to sharpen their writing skills
6. To provide opportunities for students to sharpen their critical thinking skills
7. To highlight characteristics of the literature of each period
8. To exhibit themes and styles of the periods studied
9. To display a variety of literary forms, concepts, and techniques
10. To promote an understanding of the usefulness and delight of literature

In this course students are expected to read, discuss, analyze, and comprehend “universal themes or topics in literary masterpieces, examine the sources of ideas . . . and assess the influence and accomplishments of individual writers in their own time and in subsequent time periods.”

Techniques and Pitfalls

Literature 201 is a challenging course for many students because of their varying backgrounds, reading ability, and general knowledge. The class satisfies a general education requirement at our college and so attracts students with little literary background. These students can be intimidated by older, nontraditional students who are interested in reading the texts and often know quite a bit about some of them. Some students who enroll in the course plan to major in English or have had Advanced Placement English in high school. Students also have a wide range of reading abilities. Since many of the texts are poetry, these can be challenging.

One of my favorite techniques is to become a story teller. I informally talk about Achilles’ anger, and then read the opening of the *Iliad* to the class. “How effective are you are at persuading people to choose a wise course of action when you are angry?” I ask the class. If fighting and winning fame makes Achilles happy, why does he withdraw from battle? If he knows he will live a long life without fame, what draws him back to certain

death? What are his values? Is he pursuing happiness? By engaging the students initially, arousing their curiosity, making characters recognizable, and reading a few passages out loud, I engage students and, I hope, send them home to read their assignment before their other tasks.

Ideas that work to build confidence and engage students include response papers, breaking into small groups to discuss the texts initially rather than having one large discussion, having students read a scene in a play out loud, and suggesting connections to current events. I use questions from responses, pointing out that one of the students in the class brought up in writing that Achilles resembles a spoiled brat or that Chaucer's humor is in poor taste. The student who wrote that response is pleased; other students often have excellent insights. Students who may not volunteer in class will talk among themselves, so small-group discussions help build confidence. Listening to a scene from a play helps students imagine what is going on—even poor readers bring emotion to their parts. Reading a scene from *Oedipus* gives insights into the characters and their relationships. Comparing characters in the readings to contemporary figures in movies, texts, and politics helps promote relevance. As each class draws to a close, I revert to my own storytelling, previewing the texts for the following week and relating characters and plots to contemporary life.

I also use the whiteboard in the classroom to draw diagrams: of the layout of a Greek theater (which I compare to Red Rocks Amphitheater here in Denver) and concentric circles and a funnel to represent Dante's *Inferno*. I have students draw Plato's cave and share their pictures with each other.

My college has CDs of videos relating to many of the texts I assign. Hearing poetry makes it less intimidating to read, and seeing the opening scenes from *Hamlet* helps the students keep the characters straight. I use such aids sparingly because the class discussion engages students more than passive listening or viewing.

To prepare for exams—and to keep the texts clear in their minds—I suggest that students make index cards or a study notebook. Cards should contain the title, the writer's name, a list of characters with a few identifications, the main events of the plot or support for the thesis, the setting, the genre, and themes. Each card should also contain a comment about the theme of the course: how does the text relate to the pursuit of happiness? Cards can also be used to list the titles of chapters in a longer reading, such as the *Iliad*.

Texts

Required Texts

Literature of the Western World, vol. 1. Edited by Brian Wilkie and James Hurt. 5th edition. New York: Prentice, 2001.
Machiavelli, *The Prince*, any edition.

(See “Structure of the Course” below for a listing of specific works.)

Importance of the Texts

Volume 1 of *Literature of the Western World* is a comprehensive one-volume anthology for a literature survey course. Unlike some anthologies, it is not too big for students to carry and is easy to read. Most of the selected texts are complete; those that are not have significant

portions included and summaries that fill in what is missing. Many writers are represented by more than one text. The translations are both readable and accurate. The footnotes are not intrusive and provide scholarly explanations. The pages are thick enough to be annotated.

The book includes general introductions to the ancient world, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. It also includes introductions to individual writers. The general introductions give historical and cultural background and an overview of literary genres of the period, with some reference to major writers. The individual introductions are thorough but succinct. They include biography, background, and brief descriptions of texts and style, and substantial suggestions for further reading. In addition to maps and diagrams to aid students, the book offers a three-part timeline of political and social events, intellectual and cultural events, and literary events.

Although the current edition of *Literature of the Western World* has been reorganized into major texts and background texts, enough of the background texts are still included to be useful. The background texts have no introductions, but since they are the background to the major texts, the lack is not a problem. I have added *The Prince* (in any edition) to the course because the current edition of *Literature of the Western World* contains only a few chapters on it in the background section, and I want students to read the whole text.

As mentioned, *Literature of the Western World* is a traditional text. Students reading and discussing the writers included will be exposed to both great ideas and excellent writing. They will gain a sense of the historical and cultural contexts of the works, and they will become acquainted with the fundamental ideas and literature of the Western world. Since not all of the book can be covered in one course, they will also be able to continue their inquiry by reading other texts in the book and texts mentioned in the bibliographies. Basically, they will gain an understanding of Western thought by reading some of the great primary texts of Western literature.

Course Criteria and Guidelines

Grades will be determined by averaging the following:

Exams	60 percent
Quizzes, responses, participation	20 percent
Term paper	20 percent

At the end of the semester, grades will be computed by the following scale:

90–100 percent = A
80–89 percent = B
70–79 percent = C
60–69 percent = D
59 percent and below, poor attendance, plagiarism, or failure to complete exams and/or submit the research paper = F

1. *Exams* will include identifications from readings, short-answer questions, and essay questions. To prepare, take notes: these can include your thoughts as you read, material written on the board, main points from lectures, and ideas from class discussions. In your

text, bracket significant passages: ones you like, ones that are puzzling, and ones we analyze in class. Review your notes and the class handouts.

2. *Quizzes*, given at the beginning of class, cover the reading assigned for that evening. Missed quizzes may not be made up.

3. *Responses*, due at the start of class, should be 150 words or more. Type your response. Write in complete sentences with standard grammar and mechanics. Include questions you have. I will respond to your ideas and questions in class discussions or in writing on the response. Late responses are not accepted.

4. *Discussion* is a vital part of learning, letting you question ideas, explore interpretations, and discover meanings. Thus *attendance* is essential. If your absences exceed four contact hours, you are encouraged to drop the course; additional absences will result in a significantly lowered grade or failure in the course. (A contact hour is fifty minutes; each class is three contact hours. Therefore, do not miss more than one and a half classes.)

5. *Term papers* should follow MLA format: heading, typed, double-spaced text, parenthetical citations, "works cited" section. (Need help? Visit the Writing Center, consult any English handbook [one is on reserve in the library], or check format online.) Develop a clear thesis, organize effectively, and include relevant examples and direct quotations from primary sources. Use standard grammar, spelling, and mechanics. Any late research papers will be marked down one letter grade. No papers will be accepted over one week late.

6. *Plagiarism* in college work, as in life, is unacceptable. Students who plagiarize will be asked to withdraw or will fail the course. You are responsible for knowing what plagiarism is. See me or consult an English handbook if you have any questions.

Structure of the Course

Literature 201 is a survey course that is structured chronologically. Three units cover three historical periods: Ancient Mediterranean, including Judeo-Christian, Greek, and Roman civilizations; the Middle Ages; and the Renaissance. In each period, students read major literary works, discuss genres and texts, and examine themes and ideas.

The texts read in Unit 1 are:

Selections from the Hebrew Bible
Homer, *Iliad*, and sections of *Odyssey*
Sophocles, *Oedipus* or *Antigone*
Euripides, *Medea*
Aristotle, *Poetics*
Plato, *Apology*, and selections from the *Republic*
Selections from Ovid, *Metamorphosis*
Virgil, *Aeneid*

The texts read in Unit 2 are:

Two lais of Marie de France
“Exile of the Sons of Uisliu”
Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor
Dante, *Inferno*, and selections from *Paradise*
Selections from Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*

The texts read in Unit 3 are:

Montaigne, “Of Cannibals”
Selections from Cervantes, *Don Quixote*
Machiavelli, *The Prince*
Shakespeare, *The Tempest*
Milton, *Paradise Lost*
Poems of Petrarch, Donne, and Shakespeare

Although I have listed texts I commonly teach, no course needs to cover all of these texts. I change some selections each semester. *Literature of the Western World* offers other excellent choices.

Syllabus

- Week 1** Introductions. Basic information: class syllabus, policies, and calendar, writing responses. Discussion on the pursuit of happiness. Focus on the Hebrew Bible; introduction to Homer
- Week 2** Reading: Homer’s *Odyssey*, books 1–12
Writing: Response to Homer due
Hint: spread your reading out over the week. Read a few chapters a day.
Write your response a day or two before class meets.
- Week 3** Reading: The *Odyssey*, books 12–24
In class: Comments on the *Iliad*
- Week 4** Reading: Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*; selections from Aristotle’s *Poetics*
Quiz 1: *Oedipus the King*. Note: Quiz covers content of the assigned reading
- Week 5** Reading: Euripides’ *Medea*; Plato’s *Apology*
Writing: Response 2 due to either text
- Week 6** Reading: The Romans. Selections from Virgil’s *Aeneid*
Writing: Response 3 due
- Week 7** EXAM
In class: Selections from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*. Introduction: The Middle Ages

Week 8	Reading: Selections from <i>The Thousand and One Nights</i> ; Marie de France's <i>lais</i> ; and <i>The Cattle Raid of Cooley</i> Quiz 2: Over tonight's readings
Week 9	Reading: Dante's <i>Inferno</i> and selections from <i>Paradise</i> Writing: Response 4 due
Week 10	Reading: <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i> ; <i>Everyman</i> Quiz 3: Over tonight's readings
Week 11	Reading: Selections from Chaucer's <i>Canterbury Tales</i> Writing: Response 5 due
Week 12	Reading: The Renaissance. Machiavelli's <i>The Prince</i> ; Montaigne's "Of Cannibals"; selections from Cervantes' <i>Don Quixote</i> Writing: Response 6 due to one of the texts
Week 13	Reading: Shakespeare's <i>The Tempest</i>
Week 14	Reading: Selections from Milton's <i>Paradise Lost</i> ; Shakespeare; and Donne Writing: RESEARCH PAPER DUE
Week 15	FINAL EXAM

Sample Reading and Study Questions

Literature of the Western World offers an instructor's manual containing excellent ideas for class discussion. I skim the manual for ideas the first time I teach a selection, and I review the manual if I have not taught a text recently. In addition, I have standard questions to use with most of the texts. The theme of "the pursuit of happiness" easily becomes a focal point for most of the texts assigned.

General Thematic Questions

Sample general thematic questions, applying to most of the assigned texts, are as follows:

1. What motivates the protagonist? What motivates the antagonist? What is the ultimate goal of each?
2. What are various characters searching for? If they succeed or fail, are they happy? Why or why not?
3. How does the culture of the period influence the goals of the characters? The themes of the writers?
4. What insights do the characters' goals and writer's concerns give to the historical period and culture? To universal human concerns? How are the ideas relevant today?

5. What makes individuals dissatisfied or unhappy? What outside forces from society, friends, or family contribute to an individual's unhappiness?
6. What qualities does the society or culture value? Does the text support or attack these values?

Unit 1: The Ancient Mediterranean

1. Why is Job initially content? What is the relationship between contentment and happiness? What do you think of the statement that the "Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before"?
2. The Greeks used the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as texts to teach heroic, moral, and religious values. What are some of these values? Do any of the characters achieve happiness as they practice or defend these values?
3. *Oedipus* ends with what many identify as a "conventional comment" on happiness. Discuss the implications to the Greeks of the final lines of the chorus.
4. Discuss Medea's speech to the chorus concerning the role of women when she makes her first appearance on stage in Euripides' *Medea*.
5. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle states that humans take "universal pleasure in seeing things imitated . . . and to learn gives the liveliest pleasure . . . Imitation is one instinct of [human] nature." What is Aristotle's concept of imitation? What is the relationship between imitation, pleasure, and happiness?
6. In Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, Virgil states that the arts of the Roman are "to rule the people under law, to establish / The way of peace, to battle down the haughty, / To spare the meek." Personal fulfillment takes second place to these arts. What is the Roman concept of happiness?
7. How do Aeneas' choices compare to Achilles' choices? To Jason's choices? To Job's choices? As you consider these four characters, what conflicting views of happiness become evident?

Unit 2: The Middle Ages

1. The lady in Marie de France's lai "Yonec" has a "happy love affair." Discuss the relationship between love and happiness.
2. Compare and contrast the last canto of Dante's *Inferno* with the last canto of his *Paradise*. What do the similarities and differences reveal about the visions and themes of the poem?
3. Compare and contrast the pleasures in the lives of five or six of Chaucer's pilgrims. What judgments does the narrator pass on the characters? What do the narrator's character analyses reveal about him?
4. Discuss the happiness achieved at the conclusion of the Wife of Bath's tale. What is the cost? Does the transformation of the old woman undermine her previous arguments about age and poverty?

Unit 3: The Renaissance

1. The focus of Machiavelli's *Prince* is on acquiring and keeping power to benefit the state. What is the relationship between the power of a state and the happiness of the individual?
2. In the essay, a genre developed by Montaigne, he offers his thoughts on various subjects and reveals his personality. What flaws does Montaigne observe in his society? Is he serious or amusing in his comments on cannibals?
3. What do Don Quixote and Sancho Panza hope to accomplish in their journeys? Contrast their goals. How are their goals indicative of their characters?
4. Compare Don Quixote in Cervantes' novel and Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. What does each text demonstrate about the power of the imagination to affect happiness?
5. Discuss Satan's observation in *Paradise Lost*: "The mind is its own place, and can make / A Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven." What is the meaning of this in the context of the poem? In a contemporary context?

Sample Paper Topics

I ask students in Literature 201 to write short responses (1–3 pages) to the assigned texts. The purpose is to encourage active reading before class discussion and to help students relate the texts to each other and to their own lives.

I also require a final paper of 8–10 pages. This paper must refer to primary texts from at least two of the three periods studied. Sample topics include:

1. The relationship between power and happiness in Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.
2. An Aristotelian evaluation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* with particular focus on imitation
3. Homer, Virgil, and Dante: Is there happiness in the concept of the afterlife?
4. What does she want? A comparison of Medea, Dido, and Derdriu
5. What does he want? The quests of Odysseus, Aeneas, and Sir Gawain
6. Hostages to fortune: children in Euripides' *Medea* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*
7. At what cost beauty? Helen, Derdriu, and Miranda
8. Tales (or the imagination) as a source of pleasure: Homer, Chaucer, and the *Arabian Nights*

Secondary Materials

I use handouts in Literature 201. The *Iliad* is difficult for students to start with. I distribute handouts identifying the Trojans, the Greeks, and the gods by their several names, roles, and relationships. I include a description of the setting, definitions of epic conventions, and a paragraph of background. I distribute a similar page for the *Aeneid*, including a conversion of

Greek gods' names to Roman gods' names and an annotated table of contents. I also give students an annotated table of contents for Aristotle's *Poetics*. My *Divine Comedy* handout includes several pictures of Dante's circles, notable individuals in the various rings, and a list of terms such as terza rima, allegory, and purgatory. We also look at various illustrations of the comedy, such as those of Dore and Blake.

1. Annotated tables of contents are available on the web using Google as a search engine and the titles of the books as subjects. In fact, since all the texts are in the public domain, all kinds of supporting materials can be found in a simple web search.

2. Students can use Google to find the criteria for the inclusion of works in the Great Books.

3. Library references for the Great Book sections of Literature 201 include *The Syntopicon*, Mortimer Adler's *Aristotle for Everyone: Difficult Thought Made Easy*, and illustrated copies of *The Divine Comedy*. Students are required to read the chapter on happiness in *The Syntopicon* and several chapters in Adler's book discussing Aristotle's views on happiness. These two references set the focus on our theme, "the pursuit of happiness."

4. For illustrated copies of *The Divine Comedy*, I use *Images of the Journey in Dante's Divine Comedy*, by Charles H. Taylor and Patricia Finley, published by the Yale University Press in 1997. The book has 250 illustrations produced over six centuries by thirty-five artists and illuminators, including two of my favorites, those by Blake and Dore. It's also a good addition to a library's collection. I particularly like Blake's "Gate to Hell," Canto 3, Plate 11; and Dore's illustration of Dante and Virgil crossing the Styx in their little boat, Plate 30.

An inexpensive edition of Dore, *The Dore Illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy*, is available from Dover Press for eleven dollars.

The Norton Anthology has good diagrams of the circles of Dante's *Inferno*. However, as mentioned earlier, a simple drawing of concentric circles or a funnel shape easily gives students the idea of Dante's architecture. I tell them to read and enjoy, not to worry about informative notes, and to use their imaginations. I also ask them to think about Dante's choices: what is rational about his assignment of individuals to various circles? In the context of our class, how does the pursuit of a particular way of life have serious and often irrevocable consequences?

5. Walter Gray's book, *Homer to Joyce*, is a readable, informative overview of many of the writers discussed in Literature 201. Gray makes connections between the texts and between the texts and the reader.