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## ENG 3099G-099: Myth and Culture

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# Eng 3099G: Myth and Culture

fall 2013 / Section 099

Dr. Chris Wixson

## syllabus

Myths concern us not only for the part they play in all primitive, illiterate, tribal, or non-urban cultures . . . ; not only for the grip that versions of ancient Greek myths have gained through the centuries on the literary culture of the Western nations; but also because of man's endearing insistence on carrying quasi-mythical modes of thought, expression, and communication into a supposedly scientific age. —G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions*

[The study of myth can provide us with] a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us. —Adrienne Rich

Even the observant animals are aware  
That we're not very happily home here  
In this — our interpreted world.  
—Rainer Maria Rilke

## course philosophy

This course explores the ways in which myth and myth-making across cultures relate to issues of identity, desire, language, epistemology, and violence. Myths will be approached as organizing narratives engaged in the production of social meaning and metaphysical understanding.

Our approach to the texts in the course are has as its premise the idea that what makes literature great is that it asks more questions than it answers. These texts will be challenging in both form and content. The format of each class will be relatively fluid, changing with regard to the material, my ideas, and your interests. There will be some discussion as well as the occasional informal lecture. However, this course should focus primarily on you, your questions, and opinions. Remember this is not MY class but ours.

### Learning Outcomes

1. To provide opportunities for reading and appreciating complex and challenging literary works for the insight they provide about the cultures that produced them as well as our own.
2. To allow each member of the class to engage with the significant issues and questions raised by the texts through writing and class discussion.
3. To assist in the development of skills of critical thinking, interpretive analysis, and argumentative writing.

## course texts

<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> , William Shakespeare	<i>Titus Andronicus</i> , William Shakespeare (excerpts)
Selected stories, Franz Kafka	<i>The Passion</i> , Jeanette Winterson
<i>Ashes to Ashes</i> , Harold Pinter	<i>The Song is You</i> , Arthur Phillips
<i>Breath</i> , Samuel Beckett	<i>The Speckled Band</i> , Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
<i>The Maltese Falcon</i> , Dashiell Hammett	<i>Finding the Edge</i> , Anne Carson

*Soldier's Home*, Ernest Hemingway

*Letters to a Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke

*Oedipus the King*, Sophocles

*Vampires in the Lemon Grove*, Karen Russell

## contact information

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Office Hours: T 1:00-2:00 PM; R 8:30-9:30 AM; and by appointment

## assignments

\* Short pieces of writing (2-3 pages) called "seed papers" in which you pose a productive question grounded in a *specific* passage and relates to the inquiry issues of the course about the text and then attempt to answer it. You may be asked to present and conduct class discussion with your question. Because these papers are primarily for discussion, no late seed papers will be accepted.

\* A critical paper that is engaged, engaging, original, and articulate. Writing guidelines will be handed out.

\*Active, Engaged Participation in Discussion — defined as TALKING productively.

\*A Midterm and a Final Exam

\*\*WARNING: The intellectual pre-writing work for these assignments will be challenging and time-consuming.

## final grades

Your final grade in the course will be determined by your performance on the following assignments:

Five Seed Papers	30%
One Larger Critical Paper	20%
Midterm Exam	15%
Final Exam / Manifesto	15%
In-class Writings/ Active Participation / Leading Discussion	20%

\*\*You must complete all written assignments and exams to complete the course. Failure to complete any one of the components represents incomplete work for the semester and anyone with incomplete work will not receive a passing grade for the course.

## attendance

Mandatory.

I expect you to be in class awake and prepared every Tuesday afternoon. In other words, arrive on time with your reading/writing assignment completed, prepared to participate in discussion. Because so much in this course relies upon in-class work, absences and habitual lateness will adversely affect your course performance. Attendance will be taken at each class session – you are allowed **two** unexcused absences before your grade is negatively affected. After that, each unexcused absence will lower your participation grade by half a letter. **Six unexcused absences will result in a "0" for participation. More than seven unexcused absences will result in a grade of no credit for the course.** Habitual lateness (beyond once) will also affect your grade negatively since it is disruptive and disrespectful. Please notify me by email if there is unexpected illness or an emergency that causes you to miss class. Do not get in touch asking "for the assignment" or a "rundown of what you missed." My responsibilities as an instructor lie with the students who do come to class. Excused absences are accompanied by appropriate legal or medical documentation. Any unexcused absence will seriously undermine your success in this course.

## class participation

Mandatory.

Think of our meetings as potluck conversations and activities; You should come to class *prepared to talk* about the reading for that day. Participation in a college-level course means careful, full preparation of the reading, frequent contributions to discussions, risk-taking in writing and thinking. You should come to each session armed with observations, opinions, questions, and insights, ready to take an active part in the ongoing dialogue about the course materials. Class participation means that you work actively to stretch yourself intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually AND that you work actively to contribute to the class's overall movement and success. (This might mean, for example, moving from merely your position during class discussion to striving to promote dialogue between yourself and other students). In addition to your required short papers, what else you bring to share need not be written out but should refer to specific passages in the reading as the basis for formulating a broader discussion topic or questions. Reading quizzes will happen relatively frequently to ensure the quality of our discussions.

Coming to class and saying you are "frustrated" with the reading and thus have nothing to contribute is intellectually lazy and irresponsible. These texts are demanding but rewarding; while there will be frustration with their complexity at times, this course understands that complexity as part of the challenge to which we aspire to rise during the semester.

**If you plan on doing any of the following things, you should probably drop this class:**

1. Remaining in your comfort zone and not talking in class and justifying the silence by saying you are 'just the type of person who likes to sit back and listen to what everyone else has to say.' Certainly, listening is a premium in this class and is a crucial human skill. But real listening only happens in an exchange. Letting everyone else do the talking means that you're not really listening because you are busy keeping yourself safe. Of course, this 'safety' is an illusion.
2. Remaining in your comfort zone and not talking in class and justifying the silence because you assume that you don't know enough to participate in class and other people (especially those who talk) do. To approach the class and the work in a way that suggests that one can speak only about what is already known is not only dangerous, but it's also intellectually lazy.

For our collaborative endeavor to succeed, there are three preconditions that must be met: everyone must have done the reading and done it critically and carefully; everyone must be willing to take intellectual risks and be open to uncertainty; and everyone must be willing to engage respectfully. Although I'm likely to talk a lot (that's my character), I won't give lectures, and the content and direction of the class is largely in your hands. In other words, I will serve as a resource and guide and occasionally cranky curmudgeon, but it's your class to shape and energize. Individually and collectively, this course carries with it a responsibility to drive the inquiry and conversation. As a consequence, **class participation will count for a major part of your grade.**

## class preparation

In addition to your written assignments, what else you bring to share need not be written out (although you may be asked to do so) but should refer to **specific passages** in the reading as the basis for formulating a broader discussion topic. Come to class with an agenda. That means coming with lucrative questions that you think **the texts** are asking with their form and content, not simply questions you have *about* the texts. Besides preparation, class participation also means responding constructively, respectfully, and energetically to what other seminarians share, that you work actively to stretch yourself intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. In short, you are expected to work actively to contribute to the class's overall movement and to strive to promote dialogue between yourself and your colleagues. **TAKE THIS GRADE VERY SERIOUSLY.**

## late papers

These are no fun for me to keep track of and only put you further behind. For each day beyond the scheduled due date, late papers will be penalized a third of a letter grade. **After a week, I will no longer accept the paper, and it becomes a "0."** Again, if you become ill or the victim of emergency circumstances, please email me as soon as possible and stay in touch.

### **cell phone and computer use**

You may bring your computer to class with you, assuming that you use it in a scholarly and responsible fashion. This means that you will only have applications and windows related to the current discussion open. **You may not check** email, news, or box scores, surf the web, use chat applications, play games, or otherwise distract yourself and those around you from the class conversation with technological devices.

You are likewise expected to use cell phones in a responsible, respectful, and professional manner: **turn them off when you come in to class.** If you have an emergency for which you must be available, you must discuss it with me beforehand and keep your phone on vibrate. **Under no conditions are you allowed to** text message, take pictures or video (illegal in class), play games, or use the cell phone in any other manner during class. The nature of our scholarly endeavor together necessitates mutual respect and dedicated attention during the too short time we have to discuss these texts. Violating any of these policies will result in your participation grade being lowered by a full letter grade for each violation.

### **academic integrity**

Any paper with your name on it signifies that you are the author—that the wording and major ideas are yours, with exceptions indicated by either quotation marks and/or citations. Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use (appropriation and/or imitation) of others' materials (words and ideas). We will discuss how to avoid it. Evidence of plagiarism will result in one or more of the following: a failing grade for the assignment, an F in the course, and a report filed with the Student Standards Office.

### **special needs and situations**

If you have a *documented* disability and wish to receive academic accommodations, please contact the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) as soon as possible.

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# Eng 3099: Myth and Culture

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course calendar

\* \* Because this schedule can and probably will change, it is imperative that you bring it to each class meeting so as to make the appropriate revisions.

August	20	Course Introduction  Turkle's "The Flight from Conversation" (TED Talk) Kafka's "The Top" (handout)  Samuel Beckett's "Breath" (handout)
	27	Sophocles' <i>Oedipus the King</i>  Excerpts from Shakespeare's <i>Titus Andronicus</i> (handout)  Kafka's "Prometheus" (handout)  Armstrong's "What is a Myth?" (handout)
September	3	Doyle's <i>The Speckled Band</i> / <b>Short Paper Due (Everyone)</b> John A. Hodgson, "The Recoil of <i>The Speckled Band</i> " (Sections 1-4 only) (* * Read Doyle's story BEFORE Hodgson's critical piece) Kafka's "The Trees" (handout)
	10	Dashiell Hammett's <i>The Maltese Falcon</i> pp. / <b>Seed Paper #2 due (A-H)</b>
	17	<i>The Maltese Falcon</i> pp. / <b>Seed Paper #2 due (I-R)</b>  Kafka's "The Street Window" * * Discussion
	24	Harold Pinter's <i>Ashes to Ashes</i> / <b>Seed #2 due (S-Z)</b>  Ernest Hemingway's <i>Soldier's Home</i> * * Discussion

- October      1      Rilke, *Letter to a Young Poet* #7 (handout)  
**Hour Exam / Proposal Due**
- 8      Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* / Acts One, Two, and Three  
**Seed #3 due (A-H)**
- 15      *Midsummer* / Acts Four and Five **Seed #3 due (I-Z)**
- 29      Anne Carson's *Finding the Edge*  
Jeanette Winterson / Julian Barnes excerpts (handout)  
**Seed Paper #4 Due**
- November      5      Arthur Phillips' *The Song is You* pp. 3-17  
**Critical Paper Due**
- 12      Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* Parts One and Two  
**Seed Paper #5 due (A-H)**
- 19      *The Passion* Parts 3 and 4 **Seed Paper #5 due (I-Z)**

HAPPY THANKSGIVING BREAK!!!!

- December      4      Karen Russell's "Vampires in the Lemon Grove"  
Kafka's "A Little Fable," "The Next Village," and "On Parables"  
Conclusion / Evaluation / Final Exam Preparation

\*\*Final exam date: Tuesday, December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2:45-4:45