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ENG 3009-002-004: Myth and Culture

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MICHAEL LEDDY / ENG 3009 / MYTH AND CULTURE / SPRING 2001

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We often use the word *myth* quite casually, to denigrate a story or assertion as false ("That's just a myth"). The work of this course will offer ways to think about myth as just the opposite—as a matter of powerful (though not objective) truth, a significant narrative that shapes a culture's sense of life in the deepest, most fundamental ways. Myth, after all, is what someone believes. As we read, think, write, and talk about myth, we'll learn much about the past and about ourselves. Principal questions: How do myths shape human cultures? What meanings did/do the particular texts we're reading have for their cultures? What meanings might they have for us? Our reading will focus on works from a variety of cultures: *Gilgamesh* (from ancient Mesopotamia, the oldest poem known), *Sunjata* (from West Africa, the story of a great warrior's exploits), Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (from ancient Greece, epic poems with very different heroes), Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick*, and *Pleasantville* (three works to allow us to think about American myths and American culture).

TEXTS

Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick*
Gilgamesh, ed. N. K. Sandars
Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Stanley Lombardo
Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Stanley Lombardo
Gary Ross, *Pleasantville*
Seth Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*
Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*
Bamba Suso and Banna Kanute, *Sunjata*, ed. Gordon Innes
Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Gerald Graff and James Phelan

REQUIREMENTS

Dedicated participation in the daily work of the course (reading, thinking, discussing), quizzes, a number of writing assignments, a final examination.

POLICIES

Attendance

Attendance is essential: you should attend class as often as I do. You are responsible for all assignments, whether or not you are in class when they are announced. If you must miss a class, you should get in touch with me beforehand to find out what you will miss.

Late Work and Make-Up Work

Late writing assignments are acceptable only if you have my approval in advance. Missed quizzes cannot be made up. If you have a properly verified absence (illness, emergency, participation in an official University activity), I will record a blank for a missed quiz, not a zero.

Disabilities

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

Office Hours

Feel free to come in to talk—about a question that you didn't get to ask in class, an idea that you want to

talk about, a writing problem, an assignment, a grade, etc. Oftentimes it is very easy to clear up questions and dissolve anxieties by talking about them. If office hours aren't workable for you, talk to me and we can figure out another time.

Decorum

Our purposes here are serious—not grim or morbid, but genuinely intellectual. No eating, talking, sleeping, doing work for other classes, or other private business. No sitting in the back row unless necessary due to limited space. Take notes, always. If you take off a hat when you come in, it's easier for me to see you as an individual face and person.

A Word About Discussion

I like what the writer Thomas Merton says about a teacher he admired:

Most of the time he asked questions. His questions were very good, and if you tried to answer them intelligently, you found yourself saying excellent things that you did not know you knew, and that you had not, in fact, known before. He had "educated" them from you by his question. His classes were literally "education"—they brought things out of you, they made your mind produce its own explicit ideas (*The Seven Storey Mountain*).

I think of discussion as a way to get at the substance of what we're reading. As a student I always felt patronized when someone replied to my contributions by saying "Very good" or "That's interesting" or the like, so I try not to give those rote non-responses. Instead I try to engage what someone is saying. Sometimes a student's observation will make me think of something I hadn't thought to say before. Or I might ask another question—sometimes for the sake of debate, sometimes to look for a lengthier explanation (for instance, "What makes you see it that way?").

A few guidelines about discussion: Please raise hands. If someone else gets recognized first and you still want to say something, just raise your hand again (don't think that I've decided not to "call on you"). I always try to look first for someone who has not yet contributed before going to someone who's already contributed.

If everyone comes in prepared to make some contributions to each discussion, we will have wonderful discussions. If you have qualms about participating in class discussion, please talk to me.

Grading

Your grade will be based on your writing assignments (40%), final examination (20%), quizzes (30%), and participation (10%).

Short writing assignments receive letter grades. Missing writing receives a zero. Quizzes receive numerical grades. A quiz average of, say, 103% counts as 103 and not as an A (95); a quiz average of, say, 40% counts as 40 and not as an F (55). Participation in the course receives one of five grades: 100 (consistent informed participation), 85 (frequent informed participation), 75 (less frequent participation or less informed participation), 50 (only occasional participation), 0 (little or no participation). You may check on quizzes and participation at any time.

To calculate semester grades, I use the following numerical equivalents for letter grades:

A 95 A- 92 B+ 87 B 85 B- 82 C+ 77 C 75 C- 72 D+ 67 D 65 D- 62 F 55

For semester grades, 90 or above is an A; 80 or above, a B; 70 or above, a C; 60 or above, a D; below 60, an F.

English Department Statement on Plagiarism

Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—"The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas,

and/or thoughts of another author, and the representation of them as one's original work" (*Random House Dictionary of the English Language*)—has the right and responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignment of a grade of F for the course.

Academic Integrity

Any breach of academic integrity—from cheating on a quiz to "getting ideas" from Cliffs Notes to working with another student on an essay—is a serious matter and will get you a serious penalty, up to and including an F for the course. You will also get a file in the Judicial Affairs office and be required to participate in an ethics workshop organized by Judicial Affairs. You should be familiar with Eastern's statement on academic integrity (posted in classrooms) and should ask if you have any questions about quoting from and/or documenting sources. But since the work of the course is to be an expression of your own ideas in your own words (aside from words and ideas derived from the works we're reading), questions of plagiarism and collusion should never arise. Do not "borrow" work or have someone "go over" your work or give your work to anyone (allowing someone else to make use of your work is also a breach of academic integrity and will also get you a serious penalty, up to and including an F for the course).

PROVISIONAL OUTLINE

Week 1: Introduction to the course

Weeks 1-2: *Gilgamesh*

Week 3: *Sunjata*

Weeks 4-7: *Iliad, Achilles in Vietnam*

Weeks 7-11: *Odyssey*

Weeks 11-13: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Week 14: *Ragged Dick*

Weeks 14-15: *Pleasantville*