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ENG 3009G-001: Myth and Culture

Christopher Wixson

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English 3009G: Myth and Culture

spring 2017 / Section 001 / 3.00 Credits

Dr. Chris Wixson

syllabus

The world, as we read it, is made of fragments. Discontinuous points—discrete and dispersed. . . . And what we understand of it we understand by cobbling these pieces together—synthesizing them over time. It is the synthesis we know. (It is all we know.) —*Peter Mendelsund*

[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*

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. They are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves as we strive to make imaginative sense of the universe around us. We will begin our conversations with the detective story, a kind of secular mythology that professes the presence of a superior order behind the chaos of appearances.

Our approach to the texts in the course 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 both discussion and informal lecture, and, for both to succeed, your questions, responses, and opinions are essential. 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.

Myths concern us not only for the part they play in all primitive, illiterate, tribal, or non-urban cultures . . . but 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 Function*

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

—*Rainer Maria Rilke*

Souls never touch their objects. An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with. —*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

course texts

Titus Andronicus, William Shakespeare (excerpts) *Ashes to Ashes*, Harold Pinter
The Piano Lesson, August Wilson *The Song is You*, Arthur Phillips
Soldier's Home, Ernest Hemingway *The Speckled Band*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
The Maltese Falcon, Dashiell Hammett *The Passion*, Jeanette Winterson *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles
Shorts from Rilke, Paumgarten, Carson, Barnes, Engle, Powers, Pence, Smith, and Kafka

contact information

Dr. Chris Wixson cmwixson@eiu.edu
Coleman Hall 3771 Office Hours: TR 9:30-10:30, 12:30-1:30, and by appointment

assignments

*Short pieces of writing (2-3 pages) called "seed papers" that sometimes respond to a prompt and sometimes produce self-generated topics but always should be grounded in **specific** passages from our reading due the day they are due. While these will be submitted via D2L, you may be asked to present and conduct class discussion with your question. Except in extreme cases, accompanied by proper documentation, no late seed papers will be accepted.

- *A critical paper (5-7 pages) that is engaged, engaging, original, and articulate.
- *Active, Engaged Class Participation -- defined as WRITING and TALKING productively.
- *A Midterm and a Final Exam

final grades

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

| | |
|---|-----|
| Six Seed Papers | 30% |
| One Larger Critical Paper | 20% |
| Midterm Exam | 20% |
| Final Exam / Manifesto | 20% |
| In-class Writings/ Reading Quizzes / Active Participation | 10% |

attendance

Mandatory.

I expect you to be in class awake and prepared every Tuesday and Thursday morning. 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 influence 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 "O" 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 preparation and participation

Think of our meetings as potluck conversations and activities punctuated by occasional short in-class writing and informal lectures on the material. 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, 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. (This might mean, for example, moving from merely your position during class discussion to striving to promote dialogue between yourself and other students). What 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.

Class participation also means responding constructively, respectfully, and energetically to what others in class 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.

In order to insure the quality of our discussions, D2L reading quizzes will be unlocked 48 hours before class and must be completed before 11:00 AM.

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.

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.

You may not *like* this class or all of the readings we discuss — which is fine. You won't like everything you have to do in life to move forward. College is a time to develop the skills to learn what is required in a professional manner and demonstrate to your professors that you grasp the course content. Don't come to class and sleep or check your phone or otherwise distract others and disrupt the process.

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** social media, surf the web, 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). 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.

student success center

Students who are having difficulty achieving their academic goals are encouraged to contact the Student Success Center (www.eiu.edu/~success) for assistance with time management, test taking, note taking, avoiding

procrastination, setting goals, and other skills to support academic achievement. The Student Success Center provides individualized consultations. To make an appointment, call 217-581-6696, or go to 9th Street Hall, Room 1302.

special needs and situations

If you have a *documented* disability and are in need of academic accommodations, please contact me as soon as possible in order to discuss arrangements.

Seed Paper #2 due (A-C)

9 *The Maltese Falcon* / **Seed Paper #2 due (D-R)**

14 *The Maltese Falcon* / **Seed Paper #2 due (S-Z)**

16 Jeanette Winterson / Julian Barnes excerpts (handout)

Seed Paper #3 Due (Everyone)

21 Anne Carson's *Finding the Edge*

23 Rilke's "Letter" (handout) / Turkle's "Together but Alone" (handout)

28 Arthur Phillips' *The Song is You* pp. 3-17 / **Optional "Extra" Seed paper due**

March 2 Midterm Part One Exam Preparation

7 Exam Review

9 **Midterm Exam**

HAPPY SPRING BREAK!!

21 Pence's "Cast-Offs" / Ernest Hemingway's *Soldier's Home* (1925)

Seed Paper #4 Due (A-C)

23 Kevin Powers, *Letters Composed* (2014) (excerpts D2L)

Seed Paper #4 Due (D-R)

28 Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) **Seed Paper #4 Due (S-Z)**

30 Kafka's "The Top" (1917-23) / Zadie Smith's "Joy" (2013)

April 4 Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1987) / Part One

6 *The Passion* / Part Two / **Seed Paper #5 due (A-C)**

11 *The Passion* / Part Three / **Seed Paper #5 due (D-R)**

13 *The Passion* / Part Three / **Seed Paper #5 due (S-Z)**

18 *The Passion* / Part Four

20 **Critical Paper Due** / Manifesto Assignment Workshop / Final Exam Preparation

25 August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1988) **Seed Paper #6 due (A-F)**

27 *The Piano Lesson* / **Seed Paper #6 due (G-Z)**

**Final exam date: Tuesday, May 2, 2:45-4:45 PM