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ENG 3009G-001-004: Myth and Culture

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ENGLISH 3009, MYTH AND CULTURE
FALL 2004

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We often use the word myth quite casually, to dismiss 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 human (not objective) truth, a significant narrative that shapes a culture's sense of life in the deepest, most fundamental ways. We'll read *Gilgamesh* (from ancient Mesopotamia, a combination of adventure story and spiritual quest), Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (from ancient Greece, epic poems of war and returning from war), and selections from the biblical Book of Genesis. We'll also look at several great American films with mythic content relevant to our reading.

TEXTS The texts for the course are all available from Textbook Rental: N.K. Sandars' adaptation of *Gilgamesh*, Stanley Lombardo's translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and the King James Version of the Bible (to be supplemented by a more recent translation).

REQUIREMENTS Dedicated participation in the daily work of the course (reading and talking), quizzes, recitation from memory of a passage from Homer, several short pieces of writing (in-class, most likely), a final examination.

ATTENDANCE It's essential. In the words of the poet and teacher Ted Berrigan, you should attend class as often as I do. You're responsible for all assignments, whether or not you're 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. (Call me at home if you need to; I don't have voice mail for my office number.)

LATE, MAKE-UP WORK Missed writing cannot be made up. Late writing is acceptable only if you have my approval in advance. If you have a properly verified absence for illness, emergency, or 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 Coming in to talk can be a great way to engage in genuine intellectual dialogue. It can also be a great way to clear up questions and dissolve anxieties and get expert help with writing problems. 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 discuss, a writing problem, an assignment, a grade, etc. If office hours aren't workable for you, talk to me and we can figure out another time. And when you come in, you needn't apologize for taking up my time. Having office hours is part of what a college professor does.

DECORUM The atmosphere should be serious—not grim or somber, but genuinely intellectual. No eating, talking, sleeping, doing work for other classes, or other private business. Please turn off cell phones before class begins. Anyone who interrupts the work of the class on a continuing basis will be asked to leave.

DISCUSSION I like to ask questions that make people think. I also like it when people ask me such questions. So I think of discussion as a matter of asking questions to get at the substance of what we're reading. Consider 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*).

When I was a student I always felt patronized when someone replied to my contributions by saying something like "Very good" or "That's interesting," so when we talk as a class, I try not to give those rote non-responses. Instead I try to engage what someone is saying. I might ask a question—sometimes for the sake of debate, sometimes to look for a lengthier explanation (for instance, "What makes you see it that way?"). So if you say something and I then ask you a question, I'm doing so in the spirit of dialogue. You should be asking questions too, of me and of one another.

A few guidelines about discussion: Please raise your hand. 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). When I ask a question, I always try to look first for someone who hasn't yet contributed before going to someone who's already contributed.

If everyone comes in prepared to make a few contributions to each discussion, we will have wonderful discussions. If you have general qualms about participating in class discussion, please talk to me as soon as possible. If at any point you have qualms about how things are going in class, please talk to me.

GRADING Your grade will be based on your written work (40%), quizzes (30%), final exam (20%), 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

Sometimes when I grade an essay I'll make a "slashed" grade—e.g., B+/A-, which falls between the two grades (89.5).

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.

EWP English 3009 is considered a "writing-intensive" General Education course; you may include work from the course in your Electronic Writing Portfolio. Your portfolio is your responsibility; please make sure that you understand the requirements and fulfill them in a timely way. You can find more information about the EWP at <http://www.eiu.edu/~assess/>.

PLAGIARISM The English Department's statement on plagiarism says that "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 Spark Notes to submitting a wholly unoriginal essay—is a serious matter and will get you a serious penalty. The Judicial Affairs office recommends an F for the course. You will also be required to take a course in ethics administered by Judicial Affairs, whose staff will keep your misconduct on record and notify your other profs that one of their students has violated academic integrity. 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 because 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

Weeks 1-3: *Gilgamesh, Citizen Kane*

Weeks 4-7: *Iliad, Casablanca*

Weeks 8-12: *Odyssey, The Best Years of Our Lives*

Weeks 13-15: *Genesis, Pleasantville*