California State University, Sacramento
Topics in the Humanities and Religious Studies: The “Great Books”
Spring 2010

Humanities and Religious Studies 290-01
Mendocino 1024
Tuesday 6:00-8:50

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Catalog description: Senior seminar for Humanities and Religious Studies majors; focuses on the perspectives and methods of the academic study of religion and of the humanities. Topics chosen by the instructor. Cross-listed: HRS 190; only one may be counted for credit. 3 units.

HRS 290 is paired with HRS 190, our department’s capstone course intended for majors in the senior year. The topic this term is the “Great Books.” The course intends to combine an ongoing engagement with the “Great Books” in their cultural context (something that every HRS major has done to some extent in a variety of courses) with a critical analysis of the pedagogical and political issues involved with the “Great Books” approach to education. To say the least, the “Great Books” approach has been a hot button topic in the so-called “culture wars” that have been waged in academia and beyond for decades. Through its engagement with the cultural context of the literature, our study will incorporate consideration of relevant art, architecture, history, philosophy, music, and religion, and will apply the approaches studied in the department’s two core methodology courses (HRS 105: “Approaches to the Humanities” and HRS 108: “Approaches to Religious Studies”). The course will employ a modified seminar format, emphasizing analysis of the literature and related material mainly by way of discussion.

Learning Objectives

The course is designed to provide a culminating intellectual experience for Humanities and Religious Studies majors, and thus will incorporate the primary learning objectives of the program. As they apply to this course, these objectives are:

- Through reading and discussion of a variety of challenging literary works (see “Texts” below), each student will demonstrate the development of analytical reading and oral communication skills.
- Through the writing of an analytical term paper, along with short essays in response to assigned readings, each student will demonstrate writing skills appropriate to our field.
- Through study and discussion of visual and musical representations of themes relating to the literature, each student will demonstrate the development of techniques of formal analysis within an interdisciplinary (i.e. historical, anthropological, psychological, etc.) context.
- Through an emphasis on the historical development of literary genres, philosophical themes, and artistic and musical movements relating to the “great books,” each student will demonstrate the ability to identify and analyze changing perspectives on beauty and spirituality.
- Students will also demonstrate the development of an historical/contextual understanding of religions.
- Especially due to the cross-cultural approach employed in the course, students will demonstrate the appreciation of diverse cultures.
- Virtually all aspects of the course will require students to use and enhance critical reasoning skills.

Texts

Allen Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind
David Denby, Great Books
Sappho (poems: 1, 16, 31; fragments: 9-19; 33, 34)
Plato, *Republic* (selected portions)
  - Acceptable translations available online:
Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Basic Writings* (trans. Walter Kaufman)
Rachel Donadio, “Revisiting the Canon Wars” (*New York Times*, 9/16/07)
  (Various brief readings and charts provided by instructor during the course of the semester)

**Requirements and Grading**

Each student will write a term paper (of approximately 20 pages) requiring substantial research and analysis. Students will also be required to complete several short (app. 500 word) informal essays in response to readings; specific prompts will be provided. Especially due to our modified seminar format, active participation in class is expected. All reading assignments are to be completed prior to the meetings for which they are listed (see “Schedule and Assignments”). Attendance is required, as per departmental attendance policy. Course grades will be based on the following:

- Quality of engagement in class sessions 25%
- Five responses to readings 25%
- Term paper (and review of another’s draft) 50%

Note: If you have a disability and require accommodations, you need to provide disability documentation to SSWD, Lassen Hall 1008; 278-6955. Please discuss your accommodation needs with the instructor after class or during office hours early in the semester.

**Schedule and Assignments**

1/26
Introductions

2/2
Bloom, 25-81
Denby, 11-24
*Iliad*, Books I-III

2/9
*Iliad*, Books IV-XVI

**Response due**

2/16
*Iliad*, Books XVII-XXIV
Sappho (poems: 1, 16, 31; fragments: 9-19; 33, 34)
Denby, 29-63

2/23
Homer, *Odyssey* (previous reading assumed)
Plato, *Republic* (selected portions: 367e-417b, 4491-461e, 484a-518d)
Denby, 64-105

**Response due**

*(Note: The schedule from this point forward is tentative; a revised schedule will be provided)*

### 3/2
Student presentations (all students read sections in Denby as noted):
- 1-3: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics, Poetics, Politics* (Denby, 117-127)
- 4-7: Aeschylus, *Oresteia*; Sophocles, *Oedipus the King, Antigone*; Euripides, *Bacchae* (Denby, 106-131)
- 8: Virgil, *Aeneid* (Denby, 146-155)

### 3/9
Student presentations (all students read sections in Denby as noted):
- 9-11: Genesis, Exodus, Job (Denby, 156-170)
- 12-15: Gospels (Denby, 171-184)
- 13-14: Augustine, *City of God* (selections), *Confessions* (Denby, 185-193)

### 3/16
Dante, *Inferno* (previous reading assumed) (Denby, 229-240)
Student presentations (all students read sections in Denby as noted):
- 19: Boccaccio, *Decameron* (selections) (Denby, 241-249)

### 3/23
Student presentations (all students read sections in Denby as noted):
- 25: Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Denby, 292-308)

Shakespeare, *Tempest* (previous reading assumed)

**Response due**

### 4/6
Student presentations (all students read sections in Denby as noted):
- 26: Hegel, “Introduction” to *The Philosophy of History*, and “Lordship and Bondage,” from *The Phenomenology of Mind* (Denby, 309-324)
- 27: Austin, *Pride and Prejudice* (Denby, 325-337)
- 31: Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Denby, 408-429)
- 32-33: Woolf, *To the Lighthouse, A Room of One’s Own* (Denby, 430-458)

### 4/13 (Suggestion: begin this reading assignment early)
Nietzsche, 147, 176-178, 394-98 (selections from *Human, All Too Human, Beyond Good and Evil, and The Gay Science*); 439-599 (*Genealogy of Morals*)
Denby, 356-375

4/20
Bloom, 141-144 (to end of first paragraph) and 313-335
Rachel Donadio, “Revisiting the Canon Wars” (New York Times, 9/16/07)

4/27
Basic Writings of Chuang Tzu, 1-95, 111-130
Response due

5/4
Student-led discussions; each student chooses from among the following three:
- Confucius, Analects
- Bhagavad-Gita
- Dhammapada
Draft of term paper due (two copies – one to peer reviewer, one to Professor Brodd)

5/11
Bloom, 336-382
Denby, 459-463
Response due

5/18 (Final Exam session)
Summary and conclusions: Assessing the “Great Books”
Term paper due