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Fall 2011

## Human Rights and Literature (Fall 2011)

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*Clark University*

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# CLARK UNIVERSITY

## **Human Rights and Literature Fall 2011**

Comparative Literature 109  
Classtime: Monday/Wednesday 12:00—1:15  
Classroom: Estabrook 303

Professor Robert Tobin  
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In this class, we will be reading literary and cultural documents to contemplate the concept of “human rights.” What rights do all humans have, simply by virtue of being human? Who counts as human? Do current understandings of human rights exclude some people? Do humans have more rights than other species? How do questions of gender and sexuality fit into the discussion of human rights?

As we seek to answer these questions, we will trace the development of human rights discourses from the Enlightenment to the present, looking at literature from a variety of cultures and human rights documents from a variety of sources. We will supplement our readings with outreach to local human rights organizations.

In this class, we will have some of the following objectives:

- Students will learn some of the key conceptual vocabulary around human rights.
- Students will follow current and historically important human rights debates.
- Students will learn to read subtle and substantial literary texts.
- They will learn to think critically about issues regarding human rights, a term that is often thrown about in ways that make it hard to be a critical thinker.
- Students will work on their writing skills, with frequent expository essays, as well as comments on the web.
- Students will also develop their oral skills, both in participating in class discussions and in leading the discussion.

This class really does live up to Clark’s core aspiration: “challenge convention, change our world.” We challenge convention, both in terms of upholding human rights and refusing to accept sloppy reasoning about human rights. We hope that this will result, at least in some small way, in changing our world.

In this course, Clark’s signatures guide our educational process:

- **Make a Difference:** by becoming more literate about human rights, we can become better advocates for the rights of all.
- **Learning through Inquiry:** by struggling with the concepts of human rights in a variety of literary texts, we will become active participants in the world’s on-going discussion about rights. We will also be able to reach out to human rights advocates here in Worcester and test our concepts in the practical world of human rights organizations.
- **Experience Diverse Cultures:** by reading literature from a variety of different cultures, we will be able to begin to understand in what ways human rights are universal and in what ways they have culturally specific manifestations.

## Assignments

Participation	20
Blog leading and participation	10
Blog report	5
Class assignments	5
Report on secondary literature	10
Write-up of report on secondary literature	10
4 five-page essays	40

Participation: this is a seminar, so come to class prepared and jump into the conversation!

Blog: We will have a blog on human rights, where students will discuss current human rights issues related to the texts that we are reading

Blog Report: each week, a student will report on the highlights of the blog from the previous week.

Class Assignments: There will be periodic small assignments in class.

Secondary Literature: with my help, you will find a piece of scholarly work on the text that we are reading. You will write up a review and response to the text, with correct, MLA-style, bibliographic information. You will also give the class an understandable report on the main points of the article.

Five-Page Essays: you will write a short essay about each of the literary texts that we read, except for the one literary text about which you do a secondary literature review.

## Grading

### Grade Structure for Papers:

**A:** An “A” paper will have a clear and original thesis. It will be well written, with a lively sophisticated style. Arguments will be comprehensive and buttressed by strong evidence. They will take into account obvious objections. There will be virtually no errors in grammar, punctuation or spelling.

**B:** A “B” paper will have a clear thesis and be solidly written.

**C:** A “C” paper will lack a clear thesis. Many arguments will not follow from the evidence given, or will be asserted, rather than proven. There will be errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

**D:** A “D” paper will have a topic, but no thesis. Many arguments will lack structure and not be to the point. Others will not follow from the evidence given or will be asserted, rather than proven. There will be numerous errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

**F:** An “F” paper will scarcely have a topic. Arguments will lack structure and not be to the point. There will be numerous errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

### Grade Structure for Participation:

**A:** advances the discussion; contributes complex insights; will be articulate and engaging; and enhances and encourages the participation of others.

**B:** expresses text-based, substantial ideas; stays with the topic and continues the discussion; actively volunteers; asks good questions; shows genuine effort; but might fluctuate between “A” and “C” behavior.

**C:** shows acquaintance with the text if called on; tends to offer personal opinions without textual references; does not advance discussion; actively listens, but does not participate.

**D:** continued refusal to participate in discussion; exhibits signs of disengagement, such as sleeping, zoning out, or non-attendance; and reveals no evidence of having done the reading.

**F:** “D” behavior carried to the extreme.

### **Grade Structure for Blogging:**

While managing the blog:

A: original, clever links, well-written, snappy commentary, useful information; frequent, insightful, in-depth comments, cleverly and amusingly written

B: useful information, clear and lucidly presented; clear, thoughtful responses to entries

C: just the most basic information, showing little original thought; response tends to rely heavily on the entries of others, without adding much original

D: incorrect information or some important information lacking; very cursory, not well-thought out, response, very curt response (such as “I agree” or “right on”)

F: little or no information provided; no response, flaming.

### **Grade Structure for Oral Reports on Secondary Literature**

A: thoughtful, concise, entertaining review of main points of secondary literature

B: gets the main points, but presents them less imaginatively and convincingly; bogs down in smaller details that are of less interest to the rest of the class

C: misses a major point of article; fails to convey the general ideas of article to the class

D: misunderstands large parts of article; few people in class follow the discussion

F: skips most of article; no real effort made to explain it

### **Three Final Notes:**

Attendance: Attendance is vital for a seminar class. More than three absences may result in the lowering of your final grade by a whole letter.

Lateness: Late papers complicate the grading process. Therefore, I will take off a half grade for each day of lateness. I leave the calculation up to you whether the extra work you put into a paper will be worth the grade erosion caused by lateness.

Disabilities: If you have a disability, please contact me early in the semester so that we can make reasonable accommodations.

## Day by Day

- Aug 29      Class Cancelled: Hurricane Irene!  
 Aug 31      Introduction: What are human rights? The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

### *The Enlightenment and Human Rights: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*

- Sept 5      Labor Day, No Classes  
 Sept 7      *Frankenstein*, Introduction-Volume 1, Chapter V (pp. 5-64)  
 Sept. 12     *Frankenstein*, Volume 1, Chapter VI-Volume 2, Chapter IV (pp. 65-118)  
 Sept. 14     *Frankenstein*, Vol. 2, Chapter V-Vol. 3, Chapter IV (119-188)  
 Sept. 19     *Frankenstein*, Vol. 3, Chapter V-Vol 3, chapter VII (189-224)  
 Sept. 21     The French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution. Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

### *The Holocaust and Human Rights: Bernhard Schlink's The Reader*

- Sept. 26     *The Reader*, Part 1, Chapters 1-10 (3-51)  
 Sept. 28     *The Reader*, Part 1, Chapter 11-Part 2, Chapter 4 (52-104)  
 Oct. 3      *The Reader*, Part 2, Chapter 5-Chapter 15 (105-157)  
 Oct. 5      *The Reader*, Part 2, Chapter 15-Part 3, Chapter 12 (158-218)

### *International Human Rights Courts and Commissions*

- Oct. 10      Fall Break, no classes  
 Oct. 12      European Court of Human Rights / Inter-American Court of Human Rights / African Court on Human and People's Rights  
 United Nations Human Rights Commission

*Gender and Human Rights in the Islamic World: Marjane Satrapi's The Complete Persepolis*

- Oct. 17      *Persepolis*, pp. 3-86  
 Oct. 19      *Persepolis*, pp. 87-172  
  
 Oct. 24      *Persepolis*, pp. 173-257  
 Oct. 26      *Persepolis*, pp. 258-341

*Human Rights, Race and Sexuality: Audre Lorde's Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

- Oct. 31      *Zami*  
 Nov. 2      *Zami*  
  
 Nov. 7      *Zami*  
 Nov. 9      Visiting Lecturer: Cary Alan Johnson, Executive Director, IGLHRC (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission)

*Non-Governmental Organizations and Human Rights*

- Nov. 14      Visit to the reference librarians!  
 Nov. 16      Reports on NGOs that focus on human rights issues: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, ACLU, etc.  
  
 Nov. 21      Make-Up Class  
 Nov. 23      No Class, Thanksgiving Break

*Dictatorship and Repression in Latin America: Ariel Dorfman's Death and the Maiden*

- Nov. 28      *Death and the Maiden*  
 Nov. 30      *Death and the Maiden*  
  
 Dec. 5      Visit to Office of Human Rights of the City of Worcester  
 Dec. 7      Visit to office of Jim McGovern, member of the House of Representatives and Co-Chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the United States Congress  
  
 Dec. 12      Conclusion/ Last Day of Classes