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Human Rights and Literature (Fall 2013)

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CLARK UNIVERSITY

Human Rights and Literature Fall 2013

Comparative Literature 109
Class time: Monday/Wednesday 12:00—1:15

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.

In the spirit of Clark University's LEEP initiative (Liberal Education and Effective Practice), Human Rights and Literature is a course that bridges the gap between the study of the humanities and 'real world' situations. This course will demonstrate that literature and social sciences, artistic expression and societal problems, and creativity and social change all are linked together.

This class lives 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.

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.

Finally, the course aspires to introduce the principles of Clark's Difficult Dialogues program into the seminar.

Assignments

Participation	30
Blog leading and blog participation	10
Class assignments	20
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. It is called "Human Rights and Literature 2013" and the address is "hrlit2013@blogspot.com."

Class Assignments: There will be periodic assignments in class. Also part of this grade will be preparation for and participation in lectures by guest speakers.

Five-Page Essays: you will write a short essay about each of the literary texts that we read. You will upload them to our moodle.

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:

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.

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 26 Introductions
 Aug 28 What are human rights? The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The Enlightenment and Human Rights: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

Sept 2 Labor Day, No Classes
 Sept 4 *Frankenstein*, Introduction-Volume 1, Chapter V (pp. 5-44)

Sept. 9 *Frankenstein*, Volume 1, Chapter VI-Volume 2, Chapter IV (pp. 44-77)
 Sept. 11 *Frankenstein*, Vol. 2, Chapter V-Vol. 3, Chapter IV (77-128)
 Sept. 12 Required: Michael Roth, President of Wesleyan University, speaks about Freud and the Liberal Arts at 4:30.

Sept. 16 *Frankenstein*, Vol. 3, Chapter V-Vol 3, chapter VII (128-156)
 Group reports on articles in the Norton Critical Edition

Sept. 18 The French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution.

Sept. 20 Paper due in moodle drop box by midnight.

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

Sept. 23 *The Reader*, Part 1, Chapters 1-10 (3-50)
 Sept. 25 *The Reader*, Part 1, Chapter 11-Part 2, Chapter 4 (51-104)

Sept. 30 *The Reader*, Part 2, Chapter 5-Chapter 15 (105-157)
 Oct. 2 *The Reader*, Part 2, Chapter 15-Part 3, Chapter 12 (158-218)
 Visit by Amos Goldberg (Hebrew University, Jerusalem)

Oct. 4 Paper due in moodle drop box by midnight

Oct. 7 Franz Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" (available on Moodle)
 Oct. 9 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. 14 Fall Break
 Oct. 16 *Persepolis*, pp. 3-110

 Oct. 21 *Persepolis*, pp. 111-222
 Oct. 23 *Persepolis*, pp. 223-341
 Oct. 25 Paper due in moodle drop box by midnight.

Dictatorship and Repression in the Spanish-Speaking World

- Oct. 28 Almodovar: "The Skin I Live In." △
 Required Lecture: Paul Julien Smith, "Almodovar In/And Latin America"
 Oct. 30 *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, pp. 3-71

 Nov. 4 *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, pp. 72-132
 Nov. 6 *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, pp. 133-196

 Nov. 11 *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, pp. 196-281
 Nov. 13 Workshop Professor Tobin's talk on sexual rights in the post-war world, focusing
 on Schlink's *The Reader* and Özdamar's *Bridge of the Golden Horn*.

 Nov. 18 Class Cancelled: Professor Tobin at Human Rights Workshop in Switzerland
 Paper due in moodle drop box by midnight.
 Nov. 20 Reports on NGOs that focus on human rights issues: Amnesty International,
 Human Rights Watch, ACLU, etc.

 Nov. 25 Visit by Clients of local LGBT/Q Asylum Group
 Nov. 27 Thanksgiving!

 Dec. 2 Report by John Preston on Massachusetts Commission on Discrimination;
 student reports on state-wide and other local human rights agencies
 Dec. 4 Meeting with Representative Jim McGovern, or his assistants.

 Dec. 9 Last day of classes.