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Human Rights and Literature (Fall 2020)

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CLARK UNIVERSITY

Human Rights and Literature Fall 2020

Comparative Literature 109
Class time: Monday/Wednesday 12-1:15
ASEC 304 or Online: Zoom Meeting 926 9995 5419

Professor Robert Tobin
Office Hours: for this semester, by arrangement. Contact me via e-mail.
E-mail: rtobin@clarku.edu

In this class, we will be reading literary and cultural documents to contemplate the concept of “human rights.” What are human rights? How have they changed historically? And how can literature help us understand the perplexities of human rights?

You may have additional questions: 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? We will try to get to as many as we can!

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 countries and human rights documents from a variety of sources.

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 and a written final paper.

Assignments

Participation	10
4 papers	40
9 forum posts on human rights	40
Final paper	10

Participation: because of COVID-19, participation is going to be a bit different than it usually is in my seminar. We are a hybrid course, partly online and partly in person. It turns out that when we meet in person, only 50% can be in the room at once, which is not what I was anticipating! So, when I feel we all need to be together (for a lecture on human rights or for the introduction of a new author), we will be online. In the online situation, I will usually call on people (although you can certainly “raise your hand” in the zoom room). I have found that in general it is not helpful in an online situation to just throw a question out there, hoping for a response. So, I will call on you, which should help with participation, as it will bring out the people who do not volunteer so much. When we meet in person, there will usually be just half the class (nine people), so that should allow everyone to talk. We will film the class and students who are observing from elsewhere can “raise their hands” in the zoom room.

Written Assignments: there will be four essays on *Michael Kohlhaas* and classic human rights, *The Plague* and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *Persepolis* and non-governmental organizations, and race and human rights as seen in the poetry of Rankine and Riggs, et al. See the syllabus for the details. Upload them to our Moodle. See the grading rubric for more information on what is important. Each will be worth 10% of the grade (for a total of 40%).

Forum posts on the architecture of human rights and other issues: There will be short assignments on the classical human rights documents, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, universal periodic review, the regional human rights courts, non-governmental organizations (NGO), current elections, state and local agencies, the Report on the commission on Unalienable Rights, and Kafka’s short story, *In the Penal Colony*. Each will be worth 5% of the grade, with the lowest grade dropped (for a total of 40%).

Final Exercise: Write a short comparative essay, focusing on at least two literary or cinematic texts that we have studied

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 consider 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. The thesis may be less complex, less ambitious, and more easily proven than an A thesis. The prose should also not have many errors in grammar, punctuation, or spelling, but the style might be simpler than an “A” paper.

C: In a “C” paper, 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: In a “D” paper, 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. Focuses on the class, not just the professor.

B: expresses text-based, substantial ideas; stays with the topic and continues the discussion; actively volunteers; asks good questions; engages with professor, but not as often with other students; 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; occasional private discussions; occasionally more focused on screen than on classroom discussion;

D: continued refusal to participate in discussion; frequently carrying on private conversations; exhibits signs of disengagement, such as sleeping, zoning out, or non-attendance; frequently more focused on screen than on classroom discussion; and reveals no evidence of having done the reading.

F: “D” behavior carried to the extreme.

Required Readings

Heinrich von Kleist, *New Directions*, trans. Michael Hoffmann (New Directions, 2020). *There are other translations, but it may be hard to follow classroom discussions if you do not have the same pagination as the rest of us.*

Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. by Stuart Gilbert (Vintage, 1991). *Similarly, may be hard to follow the discussion if you have a different pagination.*

Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis* (Pantheon, 2007). *Make sure it is the complete edition, not just Part 1 or Part 2.*

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Greywolf Press, 2014). *Only edition, I believe.*

Additional Notes:

Attendance: Attendance is vital for a seminar class. Generally, more than three unexcused absences may result in the lowering of your final grade by a whole letter. Our zoom meetings will be synchronous, and you should plan on attending them at the scheduled time. On days when we are meeting in person and only half the class is physically present, you should listen in to the conversation on zoom as well, because the conversation topics will be different on each day. Given the COVID crisis, please let me know if you need accommodations because of illness or exposure to the illness.

COVID Precautions: When we meet in person, please try not to gather in groups outside the door. As far as I can tell, there is no one in the class ahead of us, so you can go directly into the room. Clean your hands with hand sanitizer and wipe down your desk with the disinfectant that will be available. Make sure your desks are in their allotted places, socially distant from each other. There is another class in the room shortly after ours, so we will try to leave a little early, to give them time. Even though this class meets at lunchtime, we cannot have food in the classroom when we meet in person.

Zoom Netiquette: When we are zooming, please have your video on and your audio muted. You may of course choose some kind of zoom background if you would rather not have people seeing where you are zooming from. Do dress appropriately for a classroom situation of course. Be sure to give your full name and, if you choose, your pronouns.

Recording: A portion of our classes will be recorded so that students who are ill or otherwise unable to attend will be able to catch up. They will be available in the Panopto folder for our class. They are only for use by people enrolled in the class, in order to study the topic of the class. Do not redistribute them electronically. Recordings will be deleted at the end of the semester. If you are uncomfortable with this arrangement, please contact me, and we will discuss it further.

Late Papers: 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.

Student Accessibility Services (SAS): Students in need of an accommodation due to a qualifying disability should self-identify by contacting Student Accessibility Services by telephone (508) 798-4368, or email accessibilityservices@clarku.edu. The office is located in ASEC 208-210. Thomas Sawicki directs SAS. Please see me to discuss how your accommodations will be integrated into this course.

Sexual Misconduct Policies / Mandatory Reporting: To keep you safe, I am obligated by the state of Massachusetts and the University to share information regarding sexual misconduct or crime that may have occurred at Clark. If you tell me, I MUST tell them. However, students may speak to someone confidentially by contacting the Center for Counseling and Personal Growth at (508) 793-7678 or our faculty confidential sources: Kathleen Palm Reed, James Cordova, or Andrew Stewart. If you would like to pursue a formal complaint through university procedures, contact Lynn Levey, Title IX Coordinator by email or at (508) 793-7194. If you would like to pursue a criminal complaint you can contact University Police at (508) 793-7575 or work with Lynn Levey to arrange for a meeting with Worcester Police.

Engaged Academic Time:

We estimate that you will be engaged in academic work for about 189 hours this semester. This is based on the idea that you will be spending on average 2 hours outside of class reading and preparing for each hour in class, although we are aware that people read at varying speeds and with varying levels of care. Nonetheless, our estimate of the engaged academic time in this course is as follows:

Class time: 26 meetings at 1.5 hours per meeting	39
Prep for class 2 hours per hour of class	52
Papers: 4 x 15 hours	60
Short Responses: 9 x 2 hours	18
Prep for final	20
Total Engaged Academic Time	189

DAY BY DAY

THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND CLASSICAL HUMAN RIGHTS

- Aug 24 ONLINE: Introductions. What are human rights?
IN CLASS: What is right that you find important today?
- Aug 26 ONLINE: Before class:
WATCH: my preparatory videos on the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the French Declaration. (On the Moodle)
REVIEW: The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution (Amendments 1-10), plus the "Reconstruction Amendments" (Amendments 13-15), plus the 19th Amendment. (All on the Moodle)
POST, by 9 am on the 26th, a comment a favorite, strange, interesting, surprising, amusing, important right from one of the documents assigned for today's reading. Try to pick a right that no one else has mentioned yet in the forum!
IN CLASS: Questions about preparatory videos, discussion of posts and classic human rights documents.
- Aug. 31 ONLINE: Heinrich von Kleist, *Michael Kohlhaas*, pp. 1-40.
Kleist and his context.
- Sept. 2 IN PERSON: Kleist, *Michael Kohlhaas*, pp. 41-80.
What rights are being violated?
- Sept. 7 IN PERSON: Kleist, *Michael Kohlhaas*, pp. 81-112.
Are Kohlhaas's actions justified? Can we think of ways to update the Kohlhaas story?

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

- Sept. 9 ONLINE: Introduction to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
Before class read the UDHR (on Moodle).
By 9 am before class, POST: on the most unusual, interesting, important, valuable, wonderful, or dubious right that you find in that document. Try not to post about a right that one of your colleagues has already discussed.

- Sept. 11 By midnight, submit (upload) a short paper due on a violation of human rights in *Michael Kohlhaas*. Pick a specific right, alluding to either the French or the American catalogs of rights, show how each text (the novella) treats it and Kohlhaas's reaction. In the final analysis, what is the view of human rights in the text?
Alternative assignment: If you choose to watch Milos Forman's 1981 *Ragtime*, based on the 1975 novel of the same name, compare the Coalhouse Walker story with the Michael Kohlhaas story, again alluding to specific rights referred to in the American or French catalogs of rights. [I will talk more about this alternative assignment and the movie *Ragtime* in class.]
(4 pages)
- Sept. 14. ONLINE: More on United Nations and Human Rights
Before Class: Read the stakeholders' submissions for the Universal Periodic Review of the United States
POST By 9 am before class: Pick one of the numbered paragraphs in the submissions of the stakeholders that no one else in the class has discussed yet. Indicated what rights, broadly speaking, are in question (civil and political rights, for instance). If there are acronyms, like HRW or JS30, go to the end of the document and find out what they refer to. What organizations are reporting to the United Nations and what kinds of issues are they bringing up
IN CLASS: discussion of: Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; Civil and Political Rights; Human Rights Conventions; Human Rights Council: Universal Periodic Review; International Criminal Court.
- Sept. 16 ONLINE: Albert Camus, *The Plague* Part I, pp. 1-63. Camus in context
- Sept. 21 IN PERSON: Camus, *The Plague*, Part II, pp. 67-105.
Is the novel about fascism?
- Sept. 23 IN PERSON: Camus, *The Plague*, Part II, pp. 106-164.
What does the novel say about colonialism and human rights?

- Sept. 28 IN PERSON: Camus, *The Plague*, Part III, pp. 167-185.
What does the novel imply about medicine and human rights?
- Sept. 30 IN PERSON: Camus, *The Plague*, Part IV, pp. 189-265.
What does the novel say about gender/sexuality and human rights?
- Oct. 5. ONLINE: Camus, *The Plague*, Part V, pp. 269-308.
Before class: Write and submit a short essay on how a right in the Universal Declaration shows up in Camus's *The Plague*. You might want to think of the plague as a metaphor for fascism, in which many civil and political rights are destroyed. Or you might want to take the plague more literally and discuss rights to health care. Or you might want to consider what rights issues come up in terms of the colonial status of the community in which *The Plague* takes place. You may also want to write about gender/sexuality and human rights. (2-4 pages)
In class: we will exchange views on our interpretation and assessment of the novel.
- Oct. 7 ONLINE: Regional Human Rights Courts:
African Court on Human and People's Rights
European Court of Human Rights
Inter-American Court of Human Rights
Before class: POST a news article about an interesting case decided in one of the regional human rights courses. Try to do something different from everyone else in class

GENDER, HUMAN RIGHTS AND NGOs IN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXT

- Oct. 12 ONLINE: Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, pp. 3-86
("The Veil" to "The F-14s")
- Oct. 14 IN PERSON: Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, pp. 87-172
("The Jewels" to "Tyrol")

- Oct. 19 IN PERSON: Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, pp. 173-257
("Pasta" to "The Return")
- Oct. 21 ONLINE: Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, pp. 258-341
("The Joke" to "The End")
- Oct. 23 POST, by midnight, on a non-governmental organization that you think
might be interested in the questions raised in Satrapi's *Persepolis*. Try to
post on a different NGO than your colleagues have mentioned.
- Oct. 26 ONLINE: Non-Governmental Organizations
Before class: Submit a paper on a NGO that would deal with
one of the issues brought up in *The Complete Persepolis*
(veils, women's rights, religious freedom, freedom of
assembly and protest, arbitrary arrest, sexual freedom, drug
use, etc.). Start with a frame in *The Complete Persepolis*,
discuss the right in question (being sure to cite a specific
documented right), and show how the NGO you have found
is working on the issue. This does not have to be the NGO
that you posted about, and it can be an NGO that someone
else posted about. (3-5 page paper.)
In class, we will discuss NGOs.
- Oct. 28 IN PERSON: Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*, parts I, II, III
- Oct. 30 POST on a rights issue that has become prominent or should have
become prominent in this election. You may post your own entry, or
comment on another student's entry, or both. .
- Nov. 2 IN PERSON: Rankine, *Citizen*, parts IV-V
- Nov. 4 IN PERSON: Rankine, *Citizen*, parts VI-VII
- Nov. 9 ONLINE: Discuss Marlon Riggs, *Tongues Untied*
Before class: Watch Marlon Riggs's movie *Tongues Untied*
- Nov. 11 ONLINE: State and Local Human Rights Offices
POST before class a brief description of a local
governmental agency (the human rights office from your city,
county, or state) and what they are doing on human rights.
Be sure it is a governmental agency, not a nongovernmental
one! As usual, try not to post on the same agency as one of
your colleagues.

- Nov. 13 **UPLOAD (by midnight):** a paper on Rankine and/or Riggs. Topic: do these authors reject traditional human rights discourse, or do they try to build on it? (3-5 pages)
- Nov. 16 **ONLINE** Discussion of Conservative responses:
Report of the Commission on Unalienable Rights
Before class, Read Report of the Commission on Unalienable Rights and **POST** a comment (may also be a response to someone else's comment).
- Nov. 18 **ONLINE:** Franz Kafka, "In the Penal Colony."
Forum post by 9 am class: Submit an image from "In the Penal Colony" that you have created and explain what you were hoping to convey from the image. Other creative responses, besides images, are also possible. Comment on your colleague's posts.
- Dec. 4 at 23:55: **Final Exercise:**
Compare two of the literary texts that we have read (Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas*, Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," Camus's *The Plague*, Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Riggs's *Tongues Untied*, and Rankine's *Citizen*) in terms of their treatment of human rights. Sample questions might be: How do they approach issues of rights? What rights do they emphasize? What do they think should be done in the case of violations of rights? Do they point toward new rights? Do they propose new approaches to rights? Be sure to use rights-oriented vocabulary and refer to important documents in the history of human rights and of course write in a way appropriate for a college-level humanities course (4-6 pages, longer if you like).