205-10/13 Literature and the Moral Imagination: American Gods

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Literature and the Moral Imagination: American Gods

Texts:
McCarthy, Blood Meridian
O’Conner, Wise Blood
Johnson, ARK
Mackey, Bass Cathedral
Gaiman, American Gods
Various texts on Canvas

Course Description:

Literature and the Moral Imagination is part of the Ethics/Religion and Society focus within Xavier’s Core Curriculum. It is intended as a course in which significant works of literature are studied as representations or examinations of ethical and religious issues, in order to demonstrate how literature can further our understanding of these dimensions of human life. In literature (as in the other arts), what may be called the “moral imagination” raises questions about ethics, religion and society; it rarely, if ever, provides definitive answers, leaving readers with the responsibility to interpret these matters on their own. This course, therefore, is as much about literary interpretation as it is about ethics or religion. Thus, it complements (and complicates) the concerns of the philosophy and theology courses that are also required in the E/RS focus.

Course goals:

- to learn to read literature deeply and carefully, and develop reasonable interpretations of literary texts.
- to develop as writers of literary criticism within accepted norms of the genre.
- to become critical thinkers in regard to the literary texts and themes of the course, as well as to the other concerns of the ER/S focus.

ENGL 205 is usually taught with an emphasis on a particular topic or theme, and such is the case in this class. The title of our class, American Gods, comes from the bestselling fantasy novel by Neil Gaiman, which we will read at the end of the semester. In that novel, the old gods worshipped by the ancestors of Americans (almost all of whom were immigrants) struggle to survive against the new gods who represent modern American values and institutions. Religious beliefs, if we follow out the implications of Gaiman’s novel, are always in a process of conflict and transformation in our country. Americans are a notoriously devout people, but ours is a nation in which individual, even eccentric beliefs are in tension with “normative” faith traditions, which in themselves have changed since their inception in other countries and cultures.
Furthermore, our country is always generating new sects, cults, and denominations, some of which by now have long histories and traditions, others of which have had only a brief existence.

How does this complex religious and cultural situation affect American writers, many of whom are extremely sensitive to questions of belief and highly imaginative in their literary responses? What does a sampling of their works reveal about the ways in which such writers imaginatively respond to the great variety of American religious experiences? From the great 19th-century poetic visionaries to the violent religious revisionists of the 20th century to the cross-cultural experimental writers of the 21st century, we will at least begin to tease out some answers to this provocative question.

Procedures. Expectations & Assignments:

This class is taught mainly through discussion, though there will be some lecturing, especially on the days we begin a new work. Students are expected to adhere to the Course Policies, to keep up with assigned readings and come to class prepared with comments and questions. Students should also expect occasional unannounced quizzes. These quizzes are designed primarily to check your basic knowledge of the text (characters, plot, who said what, etc.); they will not be interpretive. Final grades are based on three exams (20% each) and two essays (15% each), with an additional 10% for quizzes and class participation.

Papers are to be turned in at the start of class on the day they are due. **Papers sent by email will not be accepted.** Papers turned in by noon on the following day to my mailbox in Hinkle Hall will be accepted, graded and returned, **with no comments and no opportunities for rewrites.** **Papers will not be accepted after this time—the grade for the assignment will be an automatic F.** If you know that you’re not a strong writer, I suggest that you work on your papers at the Writing Center before turning them in. **Rewrite policy:** I encourage you to rewrite your paper if you receive a grade in the C range or lower. A grade of F requires a rewrite. Please meet with me before you begin rewriting; then go to the Writing Center. Turn in your first version along with your rewrite on the due date we agree upon.

**A note on texts and reading:** an important goal of a literature course of this sort is to teach the student how to be a close reader. Much of what we learn from and about literary works emerges by paying careful attention to the specific uses of language—technique, style, voice, tone, etc. As you will see, much of my teaching involves reading and discussing specific passages from the texts we study. **Therefore, it is essential that you bring the text we are studying to class every day and have it in front of you. If you have an electronic version of the text, bring your device or print out shorter works.** Close reading of challenging texts is a tremendously important skill to develop—and not just in English courses.
Calendar

August 26  Introduction / Emerson, “Divinity School Address” (Canvas)
August 28  Emerson, excerpts from “The Poet” (Canvas) / Whitman, excerpts from “Introduction to Leaves of Grass” (Canvas), excerpts from “Song of Myself” (Canvas)

Sept. 2  Whitman / Dickinson (Canvas)
Sept. 4  Dickinson

Sept. 9  Blood Meridian
Sept. 11  Blood Meridian

Sept. 16  Blood Meridian
Sept. 18  Blood Meridian

Sept. 23  Exam 1
Sept. 25  Lovecraft (Canvas)

Sept. 30  NO CLASS
Oct. 2  Lovecraft  Paper 1 due

Oct. 7  Lovecraft
Oct. 9  NO CLASS—FALL BREAK

Oct. 14  Wise Blood
Oct. 16  Wise Blood

Oct. 21  Wise Blood
Oct. 23  NO CLASS

Oct. 28  ARK
Oct. 30  ARK

Nov. 4  ARK
Nov. 6  Exam 2

Nov. 11  Duncan (Canvas)
Nov. 13  Duncan  Paper 2 due

Nov. 18  Bass Cathedral
Nov. 20  Bass Cathedral

Nov. 25  Bass Cathedral
Nov. 27  NO CLASS—THANKSGIVING

Dec. 2  American Gods
Dec. 4 *American Gods*
Dec. 9 *American Gods*
Dec. 11 *American Gods*

Dec. 16 **Final Exam** Sec. 10 8:30; Sec. 13 10:30.

**Course Policies**

**Attendance.** Regular attendance is a requirement of this course. I will permit *two* unexcused absences per semester. More missed classes will adversely affect your grade. If a problem of any sort arises, *please get in touch with me.* We can usually work it out.

**Lateness.** Coming late to class is rude and disruptive, and indicates a lack of respect for your instructor and your fellow students. I expect you to arrive on time. If you do come late, please slip in unobtrusively. If I see that you are chronically late (that is, more than a couple of times in a row), then we need to talk.

**Cell phones.** Cell phone use is forbidden. Upon entering the classroom, if not before, turn off your phone *immediately* and remove it from your desk. Don’t even think of texting during class—I will ask you to leave. If you are using an electronic version of one of our texts, bring a laptop or tablet (see below).

**Laptops and Tablets.** I permit the use of laptops and tablets in class, because I know that some students legitimately use them to take notes and have electronic versions of the texts. However, I reserve the right to stroll over behind you and take a look at the screen. If I see Facebook pictures of your best friend getting drunk last Saturday night, you will be invited to continue your viewing outside of the classroom.

**Email.** Check you Xavier email at least twice between classes for course updates, assignments, additional materials, etc. Feel free to email me with your questions, comments and concerns. I usually turn off my computer about 10 PM, so if you email me at 3 AM, don’t expect an answer till at least noon on the next day. A good start to your email is “Dear Dr. Finkelstein.” “Hey” just doesn’t cut it.

**Plagiarism.** From the Xavier Catalog: “All work submitted for academic evaluation must be the student's own. Certainly, the activities of other scholars will influence all students. However, the direct and unattributed use of another's efforts is prohibited as is the use of any work untruthfully submitted as one's own. Penalties for violations of this policy may include one or more of the following: a zero for that assignment or test, an "F" in the course, and expulsion from the University. The dean of the college in which the student is enrolled is to be informed in writing of all such incidents, though the teacher has full authority to assign the grade for the assignment, test, or course. If disputes of interpretation arise, the student, faculty member, and chair should attempt to resolve the difficulty. If this is unsatisfactory, the dean will rule in the matter. As a final appeal, the academic vice president will call a committee of tenured faculty for the purpose of making a final determination.”