Politics and Literature

POST 152 Whitney Mannies

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Office Hours: 12:15-1:30 Scott Hall 112

T/Th 2:45pm – 4:00pm Avery Hall 204

Would you like to know which variables are currently the most statistically reliable indicators of the winner of next year’s presidential election? Would you enjoy analyzing the responsiveness of members of Congress to their poorest constituents? Do you desire the knowledge to make incisive comments about European monetary policy? If so, great! Society needs more curious individuals like yourself.

Please be aware, however, that this is not really what we’ll be thinking about in this class. “Politics” is in the title. I see that. But we’ll be thinking about politics in its broadest possible sense, as when Aristotle says that justice is an ordering of the soul, or when Kant argues that freedom is a moral quality. Before we get to the debating and voting and legislating, there is a vast universe of contested values that we must evaluate and order. This is the level at which we struggle to understand the nature of freedom and how it is achieved. It is where we face the challenge of directing our own lives and of discerning our obligations towards others. This is a political process.

Why literature? Is there something that literary works can communicate that a more prosaic work of political theory cannot? Is there special political knowledge that eludes us when we remain on the level of newspapers, policy analysis, or journal articles?

And what is literature anyway? If Gertrude Stein wrote down and published the results of Congress’s last roll-call vote, what then?

I am not sure. Suffice to say, I have defined “politics” broadly and, lacking precise knowledge about where mere aggregations of words end and literature begins, I have arranged this syllabus with the zeal of academic freedom (though not the license of tenure). I want to see what happens when we contemplate freedom, tyranny, obligation, inequality, oppression and war through literary mediums. Is the knowledge that results any different at all? If so, why? If not, why not?

**Learning Objectives**

* Students will evaluate literary themes and understand and debate texts’ meanings.
* Students will assess the connection (or disconnect) between the style and form of a text and the content of that text.
* Students will become more self-directed learners as they develop and hone their own essay prompts. They will formulate and defend a position while providing evidence, addressing potential counterarguments, and arguing logically.
* Students will be able to have an intelligent conversation.

**Grades**

Forty percent of your grade is participation. 40 points.

* Be prepared! Read and be thoughtful, and come to class ready to discuss.
* If you miss or are unprepared for more than 2 classes, the most you will be able to receive is 30/40. If you miss four or more classes (!), 20/40; five or more classes, 10/40.
* If you attend on-time and are prepared for every single class (no absences), I reserve the right to give out 1-3 extra credit points at the end of the semester.
* Generally, you will need to have read the entire text by Monday’s class. The first day we discuss a text, you will need to have posted three questions for discussion and one quotation that you found interesting/angering/brilliant/maddening etc. and a brief, 100-300 word explanation for why that passage stood out to you. Do this by 2:00 p.m.

Sixty percent of your grade is writing. You will write four papers for this class, each 5-6 pages long. Fifteen points each, sixty points total.

* Each will be about a work that we read.
* You can choose whichever four works you want.
* You cannot write a paper *only* about a movie, only about a movie with its accompanying text.
* Each paper will be due on the final day that we discuss that text. For example, if you want to write about *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which we discuss on September 14th and 16th, then your paper will be due on September 16th.
* The question your paper reponds to is left up to you. I will provide some example questions. You are welcome and encouraged to talk about possible paper topics with me.
* There is no midterm or final.

**Texts:**

For most of these texts, the particular edition that you buy is immaterial. One exception is Lucretius, for which only the Penguin edition is acceptable. It is available in Huntley.

Lucretius, [*On the Nature of Things*](http://www.amazon.com/Nature-Things-Penguin-Classics/dp/0140447962/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1436848284&sr=1-1&keywords=lucretius%2C+penguin), Penguin, 2007, ISBN: 978-0140447965

Albert Camus, [*The Myth of Sisyphus*](http://www.amazon.com/Great-Ideas-Myth-Sisyphus-Penguin/dp/0141023996/ref=pd_cp_14_3?ie=UTF8&refRID=0ABZJ6KYCRMJABQFJHYC), Penguin, 2005, ISBN: 978-0141023991

Ursula Le Guin, [*The Dispossessed*](http://www.amazon.com/Ursula-K-Guin-Dispossessed-Perennial/dp/B00HTJMH2E/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1436848929&sr=1-2&keywords=Ursula+Le+Guin%2C+The+Dispossessed), Perennial Classics, 2003

Friedrich Nietzsche, [*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*](http://www.amazon.com/Nietzsche-Zarathustra-Cambridge-History-Philosophy/dp/0521602610/ref=sr_1_4?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1436849028&sr=1-4&keywords=nietzsche+thus+spoke+zarathustra), Cambridge, 2006, ISBN: 978-0521602617

Baron de Montesquieu, [*Persian Letters*](http://www.amazon.com/Persian-Classics-Charles-Louis-Secondat-Montesquieu/dp/0140442812/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1436849118&sr=1-1&keywords=montesquieu%2C+persia+letters), Penguin, 1973, ISBN: 978-0140442816

Marjane Satrapi, [*Persepolis*](http://www.amazon.com/Complete-Persepolis-Marjane-Satrapi/dp/0375714839/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1436849274&sr=1-2&keywords=marjane+satrapi%2C+persepolis), Pantheon, 2007, ISBN: 978-0375714832

Eduardo Galeano, [*The Book of Embraces*](http://www.amazon.com/Book-Embraces-Norton-Paperback/dp/0393308553/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1436849386&sr=1-1&keywords=Eduardo+Galeano%2C+The+Book+of+Embraces), Norton, 1992, ISBN: 978-0393308556

Ta-Nihisi Coates, [*Between the World and Me*](http://www.amazon.com/Between-World-Me-Ta-Nehisi-Coates/dp/0812993543/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1441134598&sr=8-1&keywords=ta-nehisi+coates+between+the+world+and+me), Spiegel & Grau, ISBN: 978-0812993547

Kevin Powers, [*The Yellow Birds*](http://www.amazon.com/The-Yellow-Birds-A-Novel/dp/0316219347)*,* Back Bay Books, 2013, ISBN: 978-0316219341

Nella Larsen, [*Quicksand*](http://www.amazon.com/Quicksand-Penguin-Twentieth-Century-Classics-Publisher/dp/B004TY1Y9E/ref=sr_1_4?ie=UTF8&qid=1436849760&sr=8-4&keywords=Nella+Larsen%2C+Quicksand), Penguin, 2001, ASIN: B004TY1Y9E**Schedule:**

**Intro**

Wednesday, September 2nd:

Introduction, syllabus

**Freedom: Variations**

Monday, September 7th:

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper”

Wednesday, September 9th:

Screening: Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne’s film, *Two Days, One Night*

Monday, September 14th:

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Two Days, One Night* (continued)

Wednesday, September 16th:

Camus and *Two Days, One Night* (continued)

Monday, September 21nd:

Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*

Wednesday, September 23rd:

Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*

Monday, September 28th:

Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*

Wednesday, September 30thst:

Le Guin (continued)

Monday, October 5th:

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*

Two-page summary due along with questions/quote

Screening: Benh Zeitlin’s *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

Wednesday, October 7th:

Rousseau (continued)

Monday, October 12th:

Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

Wednesday, October 14th:

Nietzsche (continued)

Monday, October 19th:

Fall Break—No Classes

Wednesday, October 21st:

Have watched Damien Chazelle’s *Whiplash*

Chazelle and Nietzsche (continued)

**Tyranny**

Monday, October 26th:

Baron de Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*

Wednesday, October 28th:

Montesquieu (continued)

Monday, November 2nd:

Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* (I & II)

Wednesday, November 4th:

Satrapi (continued)

Monday, November 9th:

Eduardo Galeano, *The Book of Embraces*

Monday night screening: Pablo Larraín, *No* (2012)

Wednesday, November 11th:

Galeano and *No*, continued

Monday, November 16th:

“A Letter to my Nephew,” James Baldwin, [here](http://www.progressive.org/news/2014/12/5047/letter-my-nephew)

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Wednesday, November 18th:

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, continued

**Essays for Intolerant Times**

Monday, November 23rd:

“Vermeer in Bosnia,” Lawrence Weschler

“Listening to Grasshoppers,” Arundhati Roy

“A Hanging,” George Orwell

Wednesday, November 25th:

essays (continued)

**Identity, Oppression, Freedom**

Monday, November 30th:

Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*

Wednesday, December 2nd:

Larsen (continued)

**War**

Monday, December 7th:

*The Yellow Birds*, Kevin Powers

Wednesday, December 9th:

Powers (continued)