World Mythologies: Sacred Borders

ONLINE

Course Description

Goals:

- to read and interpret myths and some of the ways they function in societies and cultures;
- to read and interpret mythic metaphors symbols, and analogies;
- to compare and contrast significant characters, events, symbols, and actions (called motifs) in one story with similar events in another story;
- to describe and discuss the cultures that produced the myths;
- to improve analytical, conceptual, connective writing skills;
- to discover what these stories have to do with our lives today.

Broader Aims: to see how myths function as building blocks of culture. Note: The aim of this course is not, as Northrop Frye says, to lead you "toward or away from any position of belief." Rather, "The academic aim is to see what the subject means, not to accept or reject it"(xx). Some students may resist being led towards belief, while others may resist being led away from it. This course encourages respect for individual beliefs while also exploring the many ways of reading and understanding religious stories.

Method: We will learn to interpret myths and cultures by asking and attempting to answer some of the basic questions that people from antiquity to the present have asked about these tales. Stated broadly, some of these questions are: What are myths? What do they have to do with religion? With psychology? With the natural world? With the history and society of the peoples who produced them? How do they relate to rituals and morality? What are we to think of the similarities and differences in these traditional stories? In what ways are myths practical? In what ways are they true or false?

Thematic Focus: Sacred Borders: Why “Sacred Borders?” We might think of borders as that which exists beyond our political borders but humans have been creating borders well before tribal/state/national identity. For millennia, producing tools, art, rituals, and music have remained expressions of place and identity, sometimes leaving no doubt of time and region wherein unique characteristics that identify a certain group emerged. And, the distinction between one work of art relative to another can reflect a range of differences that challenge our basics beliefs regarding life, death, social engagements, etc. In taking this course, I assume you want to engage “World Myth” as opposed to “Classical Myth” in an attempt to travel beyond the world you know. That is, beyond the borders that make up your world view. So, this is where our journey will begin. It begins with Paleo man (homo sapiens), with his
nomadic tendencies, and it situates him squarely at the center of the civilization: the “Cradle of Civilization,” Ancient Sumer. Here man (you) ceased to be an expansive creature, at one with his natural surroundings, indistinguishable from animals and gods. Here man (we) began to establish the great borders that would divide the world into animals (Nature), gods, and humans. Here is where the tale of our “humanity” begins. World Mythology is Our Mythology.

*****We begin with a survey of early religious thought and will approach contemporary notions as we progress. This course is comparative in its approach and will include film and literary materials that may be sensitive to some participants. Please keep this in mind as you read and engage the materials.

Required Texts:

Most of the texts for this course are available online BUT you must use the exact same version listed on the syllabus, as with mythology (especially classical or ancient) translations run the gamut. The only texts you are required to purchase are listed below. One is a French novel and the other the most comprehensive version of Gilgamesh currently available. The podcast lectures will assume you have the correct versions, so to follow along you need them.


Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, Oxford University Press; Reissue edition (May 15, 2008) ISBN-13: 978-0199535651 (With M Bovary, you have the issue of translation but it is not as problematic as the mythological texts; however, the translation listed here is great, definitely superior to any free Kindle versions that I am aware of. Get this one.)

Film:

You can stream this film on Netflix or order it. It is not on Prime Amazon, unfortunately. You can probably get it from your local video store as well. Please let me know if you have trouble getting this film. And, let me know well in advance so I can try to remedy the situation.


Course requirements:

1. 20/100 points. Participation is integral to the learning processes of this course. You are required to submit at least one discussion comment or question based on the readings, weekly. Your grade will be based on the depth of your thoughts when commenting and questioning during class discussions.

   Groups: I have divided the class into four separate groups of ~12 to make your discussions more manageable and fruitful. Throughout the semester, I may post comments to the class-at-large. If you are uncomfortable with this, please let me know before the semester begins.
2. 50/100 points. Weekly short multiple-choice quizzes will help you keep up with reading, listening and participation.

3. 30/100 points. A final exam will test the cumulative information garnered from the beginning of the semester to the class just prior to the exam. This exam will include class discussions, film, and reading assignments. This exam will be a series of short-answer questions.

UNIVERSITY POLICY:

Academic regulations and procedures are governed by University policy. Academic dishonesty cases will be handled in accordance the University's policies.

If you have a disability that could affect your performance in this class or that requires an accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act, please see me as soon as possible so that we can make appropriate arrangements. The Affirmative Action Office has asked that you be made aware of the following:

Michigan Tech complies with all federal and state laws and regulations regarding discrimination, including the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. If you have a disability and need a reasonable accommodation for equal access to education or services at Michigan Tech, please call the Dean of Students Office, at 487-2212. For other concerns about discrimination, you may contact your advisor, department head or the Affirmative Action Office, at 487-3310

Academic Integrity: http://www.studentaffairs.mtu.edu/dean/judicial/policies/academic_integrity.html

Affirmative Action: http://www.admin.mtu.edu/ao/

Disability Services: http://www.admin.mtu.edu/urel/studenthandbook/student_services.html#disability


Tentative Schedule

6/29  Introduction (Podcast)
6/30  The Epic of Gilgamesh (podcast I and II)
7/1   The Epic of Gilgamesh (Podcast III and IV)
7/2   The Epic of Gilgamesh (Podcast V and VI)

Quiz One

7/6   Excerpts from “The Book of the Dead,” (BOD Podcast I and II)
7/7   “Letters to the Dead” (Letters to the Dead Podcast)
7/8   Erra and Ishum and the Problem of Evil (E&I Podcast)
7/9   Athens and Classical Literature
Quiz Two

Classical Mythology
7/13  Hesiod’s Theogony/Works and Days
7/14  Hymn to Demeter and the Eleusian Mysteries (Demeter and Eleusian Mysteries Podcast)
7/15  Hymn to Aphrodite and Apollo
7/16  Drama and Aeschylus’ The Oresteia (Eumenides)

Quiz Three

7/20  Aeschylus’ The Oresteia (Eumenides)
7/21  Sophocles’ Oedipus the King
7/22  Sophocles’ Oedipus the King
7/23  Hymn to Dionysus/ Euripides’ The Bacchae

Quiz Four

7/27  Euripides’ The Bacchae (Bacchae 1 and 2)
7/28  Genesis 1 – 3/Book of Job (Jewish Torah) (Genesis and Job Podcast)
7/29  Genesis 1 – 3/Book of Job (Jewish Torah) (Genesis and Job Podcast)
7/30  Book of John 18

Quiz Five

8/3  Serpent and the Rainbow (Podcast)
8/4  Discuss the Enlightenment/Modernity/Aubrey de Grey (Enlightenment and Enlightenment 2 Podcasts)
8/5  Madame Bovary (Flaubert and Charles Bovary Podcast)
8/6  Madame Bovary (Flaubert and Madame Bovary Podcast)

Quiz Six

8/10  Madame Bovary (Flaubert, Emma and Ennui Podcast)
8/11  Watch the Film Old Boy
8/12  Old Boy lecture and review
8/13  Final Exam