

## Introduction to Comparative Literature

### Comparative Studies 273

#### Sample Syllabus

**Course Description** This course introduces students to important issues in the study of Western and non-Western literatures and their relation to culture and society. While emphases and specific texts will vary from instructor to instructor, the course will address such basic topics as the role of language and literature in different cultures and historical periods; the function of oral and written literatures in different cultural contexts; the role of literary representation in constructing racial, gender, class, ethnic, and national identity; problems involved in the translation and interpretation of literary texts; and economic and political issues as they relate to literary production.

This sample syllabus will approach the question, "What is literature?" by asking, "What is a text?" Discussion will begin with the problem of translation as a key issue in the reading, interpretation, and comparison of texts (literary, scriptural, oral) from different cultures and historical periods, and will consider the status of these categories themselves as value-laden cultural terms. The issue of translation will be examined, both historically and practically, as a means of raising larger questions about cultural traditions, cultural differences, cross-cultural communication, nationalism, and the authority of texts. It will end with a close look at contemporary literary texts that address these issues. Work in the course will range from the close scrutiny of particular texts and translations to broader questions about language, cultural identity, and the politics of culture.

**Course Objectives** The goals of this course are to introduce students to the kinds of questions that arise both in the analysis of specific literary texts and in the study of contextual issues. By the end of the course, students should understand that these two approaches to literature are intertwined in important ways. The course is not intended as a critical or historical survey of the many schools of literary criticism, but rather as a general introduction to the ways in which different literatures function within the cultural and social systems of which they are a part. Students should begin to understand the interrelatedness of literature to questions of language and culture, identity and difference, nationality and nationalism, reading and interpretation, writing and authority, and other issues.

**Requirements** Class meetings will combine lecture and discussion. It is imperative that students complete reading assignments before class in order to participate and benefit fully. Writing assignments will include weekly reading notes on each text assigned (1-2 pages collected weekly) and three 5-7 page papers. Papers will involve students' thinking and writing about the literary and critical texts read in class, and some classtime will be set aside for discussion of paper topics and expectations. Grades for the class will be assigned as follows:

Class discussion	20%
Reading notes	20%
Paper 1	20%
Paper 2	20%
Paper 3	20%

**Required Texts:**

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Goethe, *Faust*

Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*

Aimé Césaire, *Une Tempête/ A Tempest*

Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*

Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/ La Frontera*

Photocopied packet:

Selections from the Bible: from Genesis, Corinthians

Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" (from *Illuminations*)

Benedict Anderson, "Cultural Roots" (from *Imagined Communities*)

Native American and African oral narratives of creation and linguistic dispersion

Dell Hymes, from "*In Vain I Tried to Tell You*": *Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics*

Dante, passages from *The Divine Comedy*; *De Vulgari Eloquentia*

Montaigne, "On Cannibals"

Herder, "Human Nature, Language, and History" (from *Against Pure Reason*)

Ngugi Wa Thiongo'o, "The Language of African Literature" (from *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Culture*)

Chinua Achebe, "Named for Victoria, Queen of England" (from *Hopes and Impediments*)

**Weekly Syllabus****Week One: Scripture and Texture: Biblical Translation**

Discussion of linguistic diversity as it arises within the discourse of Christianity; the historical and cultural significance of Biblical translations

Reading: From Packet, selections from Genesis, the story of Babel, and Corinthians I; Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator"; and Benedict Anderson, "Cultural Roots"

**Week Two: Scripture and Myth/Literature and Orature**

Discussion: Oral narratives of creation and linguistic dispersion; Sapir-Whorf hypothesis on "linguistic worlds"

Readings: From packet, Native American and African stories; Dell Hymes, "In Vain I Tried to Tell You"

**Week Three: Vernacular Language and Cultural Difference**

Discussion: Language usage and constructions of "Otherness" and difference

Readings: From packet, passages from Dante, *The Divine Comedy*; selections from *De Vulgari Eloquentia*; Montaigne, "On Cannibals"

\* First paper due (students will choose a particular issue raised by Hymes, Anderson, or Benjamin and discuss that issue as it relates to one or more of the literary texts read thus far)

**Weeks Four and Five: Power, Politics, and Translation**

Discussion: A close look at the significance of language in the establishment and development of power relations

Readings: Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

**Weeks Five and Six: Nationalism, Literature, and Translation**

Discussion: The functions of language and literature in the development of nationalism; the question of “national literatures”

Readings: From packet, Herder’s “Human Nature, Language, and History,” from *Against Pure Reason*; Goethe, *Faust*.

**Week Seven: Compulsory Translation**

Discussion: Colonialism and African literature, writing literature in a second language; Achebe/Ngugi debate on the use of English in African literature

Readings: Achebe, *Arrow of God*; from packet, Ngugi’s “The Language of African Literature”; and Achebe’s “Named for Victoria, Queen of England”

\*Second paper due (papers will address the relationship between language and identity as it arises in *The Tempest* and/or *Arrow of God*)

**Week Eight: *The Tempest* Revisited**

Discussion: Re-readings and re-writings: reevaluation and reinterpretation of literary texts, the significance of historical and cultural context for reading and writing, Caribbean debates on Ariel/Caliban

Readings: Aimé Césaire, *Une Tempête/A Tempest*

**Weeks Nine and Ten: Translation and Cultural Difference: Colonialism and Resistance**

Discussion: Discussion and comparison of literary works produced within the context of two different colonialist enterprises

Readings: Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (week 9); Tayeb Salih, *A Season of Migration to the North* (week 10)

\*Third paper due (paper will be an analysis of language as a particular theme in Césaire’s, Anzaldúa’s, or Salih’s texts.)