

July/August 2018

ENGL 5900 T

History, Oppression, and the Literary Imagination

Classes: Monday/ Wednesday 11:35 – 2:25

Loc: TBA

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Office Hours: TBA

NB: This is a tentative course outline to give you an idea of the content and structure of the course. It's likely that some of the readings will change, and evaluation is subject to minor changes, depending on the number of students enrolled in the course. The final reading list will be available by mid-June; the evaluation criteria will be determined just before classes start.

DESCRIPTION:

In this course, we will read novels written between 1900 and 1950, each dealing with historical situations of oppression, specifically, worker exploitation, revolution, imperialism, racism, and political imprisonment. Because all were authored by someone personally involved in these events and situations, the novels present an insider perspective that is ideologically inflected. Nevertheless (and this is the interesting part), these novels set out a view of history that is in some ways extraordinarily balanced, rejecting the reductive tendency to situate people and events on either one side or the other of an assumed binary situation. Though the settings and contexts differ widely in time and place, the novels all conclude that oppression is bad for everyone. They are unanimous in teasing out the implications of terms such as “dehumanization,” and they are consistent in relentlessly interrogating the implications of being human, for better *and* worse.

The governing questions of the course focus broadly on the contribution literature makes to the study of history. More specifically, what advantages does the novel offer those who want to chronicle historical events based on personal experience? What happens when the literary imagination meets historical truths? Why, when each of these authors is known to have a distinct political agenda, are they so uniform in highlighting contradiction and complicity in ways that deny readers the easy answers we desire from troubling books and situations? Finally, can we postulate a unique and important role for the novel in current discourses of human rights, one not limited to bearing witness, truth-telling, or confessing guilt?

In keeping with the aims of each author, we will undertake to understand as fully as is possible in a seminar the historical and political contexts of each novel, the author's relationship to events, and the author's aims in writing the novel, and to examine the books within these contexts. Research will involve arguments primarily based on grounds other than theory and literary

criticism, using evidence from not only history, but law, biography, letters, newspapers, and other contemporary sources.

EVALUATION:

Individual seminar 25%
Background group seminar 15%
Roundtable discussion questions (x2) 20%
Attendance/participation 15%
Essay 25%

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Azueta, Mariano. *The Underdogs: A Novel of the Mexican Revolution* (Penguin Classics)
Kogawa, Joy. *Obasan* (Penguin Canada)
Sembène, Ousmane. *God's Bits of Wood* (Longman)
Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle* (Penguin Classics)
Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Signet Classics)

These books are available at Octopus Books, 116 Third Ave.

1. **Attendance:** Class attendance is mandatory. Excused absences must be medically documented. Absences for work reasons will not be excused. Students who attend only part of a class will be counted as absent for that class. Students with more than one unexcused absence will lose ten attendance points.

All students are expected to contribute productively to every class and on every novel. Students will receive a penalty of two points from their attendance/participation mark for each class in which they do not substantively participate. The participation mark will be based on demonstration of knowledge of the texts being discussed and the relevance and contribution value of comments.

PLEASE NOTE: Unless a student has a documented accommodation, the use of laptops or other electronic devices is not permitted in this seminar.

2. **Seminars:** Each student will present two seminars: A) as a participant in an 80-minute group-led seminar on a major historical aspect of the novel, and B) a 25-30-minute individual seminar that makes a focused argument regarding an aspect of the novel being discussed.

A) Background group seminar: Each group will prepare an 80-minute seminar that consists of a presentation made up of equal contributions by group members (contributions may be arranged however you wish) and prepared questions that will lead to productive discussion of their presentation relative to the novel. (Suggested time allocation: 40 minutes for the presentation, 40 minutes for the discussion.) The background seminar should focus only on in-depth background without reference to the novel, and the questions should focus on the novel in relation to the background material presented. The background group seminar should include basic background material, but should focus primarily on a specific area. Suggestions for specific areas appear at the end of the course outline.

Students may not give their background seminar and individual seminar on the same novel.

B) Individual seminar: Each student will present a 50-minute seminar (25-30 minute individual presentation, plus discussion questions) that makes a focused argument regarding an aspect of the novel being discussed. Presenters are strongly encouraged to discuss topics with me at least a week before the presentation takes place. **It is essential that all the presenters on the same novel speak with each other very early on so as not to duplicate material and also that they not duplicate the material presented in the background seminar.**

On the night before the presentation, the presenter will e-mail an abstract of the presentation to each member of the class and to me.

At the end of her or his seminar, the presenter will also lead a 15-20 minute discussion. Some questions may be generated by the class, but the presenter should also be prepared to ask questions relevant to his/her seminar argument.

Following the seminar and discussion, the presenter will hand in a legible hard copy of seminar notes (may be informal) **and** a proper Works Cited page.

A note about seminar presentations:

1. Don't take on too much. Your argument should be informed, straightforward, and intelligible.
2. Practice aloud for clarity, coherence, and timing.
3. Keep it straight and simple. Complex theoretical ideas that work well in an essay are difficult to follow in an oral presentation.
4. Make eye contact and speak clearly and audibly.
5. Use up but do not exceed your allotted time.

A note about PowerPoint presentations:

1. Use keywords and images rather than a lot of text on slides.
2. Do not read from your slides.
3. Show quotations only if you are going to discuss or explicate them.
4. Don't substituted visual cleverness for intellectual substance.

Remember that PowerPoint can add to or detract from a seminar presentation.

3. Roundtable discussions: At the conclusion of each novel, a roundtable discussion of 80-90 minutes will be led by groups of students (excluding those who presented a seminar on that novel). Each student will participate in two roundtable discussion groups. Students may not lead roundtable discussions on the novels on which they presented their individual seminar, but they may lead one roundtable discussion on the novel on which they presented their background seminar. The roundtable discussions should deal in part with the themes and aims of the course set out in the title and description.

Each discussion group will have heard the background seminar and first individual seminar on the novel being discussed. Please find out the subject of the second seminar, which will occur on the same day as the roundtable discussion, so as to prevent duplication and repetition of material in roundtable discussion questions.

Five percent of each discussion mark will be peer-determined.

4. **Essay:** The essay (13-15 pages) will focus on complication, contradiction, **OR** complicity in one or more novels from the course.

Although I will be glad to work with you on your thesis statements by e-mail, I DO NOT ACCEPT PAPERS BY E-MAIL.

The essay may be turned in at any time during the term, but no essays can be accepted after **August 16.**

Late assignments will not be accepted without a valid doctor's certificate.

5. **Collaboration:** Although you are encouraged to talk with each other about assignments and to review each other's work, all assignments written for evaluation are to be the original work of individual students.

6. **Plagiarism:** See an overview of Instructional Offenses and their consequences at <https://carleton.ca/registrar/academic-integrity/>

Plagiarism is a serious matter and can be grounds for expulsion from the University. Plagiarism often occurs because a student is not sure where to draw the line between common knowledge, paraphrase, and direct quotation -- and indeed, the distinctions are sometimes hard to make. The rule of thumb is this: All direct quotations have to be contained by quotation marks and their sources cited; all paraphrases have to be clearly indicated as such, and their sources also cited. When in doubt about whether a point that you are making is common, shared knowledge in the public domain or the "intellectual property" of another author, either contact me for clarification or err in the direction of documentation.

Please note that I hand over ALL cases of suspected plagiarism to the Dean of the Faculty