HONORS SEMINAR: AESTHETICS, AUTHORITY, AND VALUES

IDH 3005 (03) Honors Seminar
Fall Semester 2003
Tues/Thurs 11:00-12:15pm
Prof. M. Hoder-Salmon
DM 466A
305-348-6390
hodersm@fiu.edu
Office Hours: Tues/Thurs. 1-1:45pm,
Tues. 3:30-5pm, & by app’t.

Experiencing the variety of meanings available in a work of art, helps makes us tolerant and mentally lithe. Art is a realm of thought experiments that quicken, sharpen, and sweeten our being in the world. Wendy Steiner

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone, J. K. Rowling
Persepolis, Marjane Satrapi
Life of Pi, Yann Martel
Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress, Dai Sijie
Girl With a Pearl Earring, Tracy Chevalier

This semester we will read, think, discuss and write about a series of novels that embrace the intersections of art, values and authority in context with the challenges of “coming of age.” While at the center of each novel is a youthful protagonist, the books’ narrative focuses are, however, uniquely diverse. Through our travel in texts we will come to know Hogwarts, a fantasy site of danger and opportunity; something of Iran’s deeply complex and repressive culture; the adventures found at sea adrift on a lifeboat with a tiger; a rebellious perspective on hard labor in the beautiful countryside of Mao’s revolutionary China; and life in the household of the 17th century Dutch artist, Vermeer.

For each book there is a writing assignment organized to encourage critical thinking, writing skills and graceful style. Students, in groups of 4 to 5, will also plan and present various interpretive projects connected to each book. In addition to these readings and projects, the class will view films, visit the Art Museum, attend a play, engage in “café con leche” get-togethers and participate in unscripted activities.

Grades will be based on the essay assignments; group presentations; class participation; and collegiate good citizenship, which includes attendance and timeliness.

SCHEDULE:

Aug. 26 Course Introduction
Poetry: “Love After Love” by Derek Walcott & “The Journey” by Mary Oliver
28 Organize group presentations & other course details
“The Potter’s smiled and waved at Harry and he stared hungrily back at them...he had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness.”

Sept. 2/4  DUE:  Harry Potter, pages 1-130
Documentary video on Potter mythology

9/11  DUE:  Harry Potter, pages 131-309
Film clips

16  DUE:  Harry Potter group presentation

“Now that Tehran was under attack, many fled. The city was deserted. As for us, we stayed. Not just out of fatalism. If there was to be a future in my parent’s eyes, that future was linked to my French education, and Tehran was the only place I could get it.”

18  DUE:  Persepolis, pages 1-32
(Essay on Harry Potter)

23/25  DUE:  Persepolis, pages 33-153

30  DUE:  Persepolis group presentation

“Mr. Patel, a tiger is an incredible dangerous wild animal. How could you survive in a lifeboat with one? Its—”

Oct. 2  DUE:  Life of Pi, pages vii-137
(Essay on Persepolis)

7/9  DUE:  Life of Pi, pages 137-319
14  DUE:  Life of Pi group presentation
16  DUE:  (Essay on Life of Pi)
    Art Museum Visit: “The Land Through a Lens”

“Just about everyone in the village had come to the house on stilts to witness the arrival of the city youths...‘Comrade, it’s a musical instrument,’ Luo said as casually as he could, ‘and my friend here’s a fine musician. Truly.’”

21/23  DUE:  Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress, pages 3-111

28/30  DUE:  Balzac. . . pages 135-197

Nov. 4  Film:  TBA
6  DUE:  Balzac. . . group presentation
11  VETERANS DAY
“He was right — the painting might satisfy van Ruijven, but something was missing from it.

I knew before he did. When I saw what was needed — that point of brightness he had used to catch the eye in other paintings — I shivered. This will be the end I thought.”

13 DUE: *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, pages 3-86
   (Essay on Balzac. . .)

18/20 DUE: *Girl. . .* pages 89-233

25 DUE: *Girl. . .* group presentation

27 THANKSGIVING

Dec. 2/4 “Catch-up”, course summary, next semester planning
   (Essay on *Girl. . .*)

**NOTE:** In October we will plan to attend the FIU Theatre Department’s production of “Picasso at the Lapin Agile” by Steve Martin. This comic play features witty and fanciful dialogue between Picasso and Albert Einstein about “painting, probability and the future of the world.”

**ASSIGNMENT GUIDELINES:**

**ESSAYS:** There is a writing assignment for four of the five books we are reading this semester. Select your four, and follow the due dates in the schedule. Each paper should be between four and six pages. Standard research and writing style is expected. For each essay I will expect two research citations, one library and one Internet source. As an alternative, with permission, students may substitute, for two of the four papers, a creative project, including development of a website. Assignment descriptions, which are intended to be helpful, follow; however, note that you may substitute, with permission, your own idea. Additional details will be provided in class.

1. *Harry Potter:* J. K. Rowling utilizes fantasy, myth, history, geography, and familial relations to create a compelling story about the interweaving of choice and destiny through the lens of moral complexity. Construct a mental triangle using the theme of aesthetics, values and authority to interpret a narrow aspect of the book’s many possibilities for literary and historical interpretation. As suggestions, you may use character, theme, setting, religion, family, society or any other category. (Note: There are now numerous books in various disciplines, including philosophy, history, and literature, on the sources and meanings of the Potter “Phenomenon” which may be used as background).
2. *Persepolis*: Graphic novels have become a postmodern genre, but Marjane Satrapi, (like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*) uses the cartoon format to develop a serious narrative that is an ironic tale of political history and memoir. The current challenges in combating terrorism worldwide provide an interesting counterpoint to *Persepolis*; for your essay find a topic in current events and compare and contrast to the theme of the novel. (Note: The “New York Times” and other media are closely following events in Iran now, events that support Satrapi’s theme).

3. *Life of Pi*: There are many stories in literature about the theme of lost at sea and rescue. This novel, which won the prestigious Booker Prize for fiction, is at one level a fantasy about an adventure at sea with a wild animal and a teen-ager. That playful plot device, however, is developed to take the reader on a philosophical journey concerning spirituality and social hierarchy. Find an aspect of the book that interests you and write an interpretive essay that incorporates one of the course’s three themes. (Note: This book may lead the reader into various discourses of current interest, including animal rights).

4. *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*: Throughout the novel, the repression of Western literature and by extension Western culture and values is presented as severe deprivation. Part historical novel, part fable, part autobiography, this unusual novel appears to make a claim for the power of storytelling regardless of circumstance. Why does the author believe so strongly in the significance of literature? Locate a non-fiction article about this theme, and keeping in mind aesthetics, values and authority, write an essay that develops Sijie’s ideas in context with your source. As an alternate, read in translation one of the novels that the narrator reads, and discuss how the book influences Sijie’s text. (This alternate topic is worth “extra points.”)

5. *Girl With a Pearl Earring*: Chevalier’s novel is so rich in details that one may come away believing that this historical rendition of a time and place is based on observation rather than imagination combined with known particulars. In this study of a great artist and two families of different social class there is a splendid opportunity to examine ideas about the moralities of art, the evolving traditions of gender and familial roles, as well as how Chevalier evokes a painterly gloss through her narrative style. Further interest may be found in a historical study of 17th century Delft, including, of course, of Vermeer’s art. Undertake any one of these topics to fashion an essay that engages the novel’s ideas.

**GROUP PRESENTATIONS:**

The assignment for group presentations will be organized in class. The groups may use a variety of formats, including, for example, debate, media, theatrical or historical background. Planning, preparation, originality, participation and effectiveness will all be considered.
CLASS PARTICIPATION:

Students are expected to engage in class discussion during each class period. Also, at intermittent class meetings several students will be assigned to lead discussion, which will include planning questions, noting interesting passages, summarizing central themes, offering connections, and other means of fostering dialogue.

GRADING:

Essays: Each of the four count 18%
Presentation: Individual 18%
Collegiality: Includes class participation, attendance and promptness, and routine adherence to collegiate standards 10%

NOTE: Infractions of collegiate standards may incur higher penalties of grade deflation.

ESSENTIAL COURSE AND UNIVERSITY POLICIES:

Strict adherence to the University’s Code of Academic Integrity, including plagiarism, is mandatory. The code is printed in the student handbook and is available online.

Two absences accompanied by a legitimate excuse are permitted. Two late arrivals are permitted.