HONORS SEMINAR: AESTHETICS, AUTHORITY, AND VALUES

IDH 3006 (UO5) [#13403] Spring Semester 2005
Tues/Thurs 11:00-12:15pm
Prof. M. Hoder-Salmon
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Office Hours:  Tues./Thurs. 1:15–2:15 / Thurs. by app’t

Art requires philosophy, just as philosophy requires art. Otherwise what would become of beauty?
Paul Gauguin

Reading is a means of thinking with another person’s mind; it forces you to stretch your own.
Charles Scribner Jr.
Art is the signature of civilizations.
Beverly Sills

Storytelling is something that can awaken attentiveness, engagement, and empathy to a life that isn’t one’s own. And to be attentive, engaged, empathetic: That is moral.
Rebecca Goldstein (“Seed: The Moral Clout of Storytelling”)

Why write? To read what I’ve written. Why read what you’ve written? Because for all its possible flaws and omissions no one else could have written it.
Joyce Carol Oates (Georgia Review)

The semester’s focus is on the Nobel Laureates in literature. This special project is intended to develop more sophisticated academic skills by concentrating on a comprehensive research and writing exercise, with each student choosing her or his own Laureate to study. The assignment page of the syllabus provides details.

The books the class will read together is a collection of diverse texts, beginning with the South African author, John Coetzee, who won the 2003 Nobel Prize for Literature. We are reading his fictional essay on the question of justice for animals, an unusual book based on Coetzee’s lecture given for Princeton’s prestigious Tanner Series. Then, we follow another Nobel Laureate, this time an American, Toni Morrison, into the astonishing world she created for her portrayal of slavery, the theme of the distinguished novel Beloved. The last three books, by renowned authors who are not Laureates, include British author Virginia Woolf. Her novel, Mrs. Dalloway, relates one day in the life of a socialite planning a party, but is about many things, particularly the loss of certainty in the aftermath of the first world war. Unlike Virginia Woolf, the author John Dos Passos is comparatively little recalled today. Yet in mid-twentieth century his fiction earned universal acclaim. Currently, Dos Passos’ fiction is on the edge of rediscovery and in celebration of this rightful acknowledgment we will read The Big Money, the final novel of his famous trilogy U.S.A., said to be the quintessential American story. Finally, we move into strange realms with a scientist’s foray into fiction, Einstein’s Dreams, about the “. . .time-tangled, tragic and sublime nature of human life.”
**REQUIRED BOOKS** (Bookstore Editions):

*Lives of the Animals*, John Coetzee  
*Beloved*, Toni Morrison  
*Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf  
*The Big Money*, John Dos Passos  
*Einstein’s Dreams*, Alan Lightman

**SCHEDULE**

January 11:  
Poetry  
The course

How we treat animals is of no importance except insofar as being cruel to animals may accustom us to being cruel to Humans. (*Animals*)

January 13:  
*Lives of the Animals*, Introduction and Chapter 1

January 18/20:  
*Lives of the Animals*, Chapter 11 and the four reflections  
Film: Scenes from “Babe”

January 25:  
Group presentation on *Animals*  
27: Library visit (details TBA) (Nobel author selection)  
1st essay due, on *Animals*

Beloved, scratching the back of her hand, would say she remembered a woman who was hers, and she remembered being snatched away from her. (*Beloved*)

February 1/3:  
*Beloved*, pages 3-129

February 8/10:  
*Beloved*, pages 130-end  
Film: Scenes from “Beloved”

February 15:  
Group presentation for *Beloved*  
17: 2nd essay due, on *Beloved*  
Library hour: Nobel project research

As a cloud crosses the sun, silence falls on London; and falls on the mind. Effort ceases. Time flaps on the mast. There we stop; there we stand. Rigid, the skeleton of habit alone upholds the human frame. (*Mrs. Dalloway*)

February 22/24:  
*Mrs. Dalloway*
March 1: Film: Scenes from “Mrs. Dalloway”
3: Group presentation on Mrs. Dalloway
3rd essay due, on Mrs. Dalloway

... he thought of the great continent stretching a thousand miles east and south and north, three thousand miles west, and everywhere at mineheads, on the shore of newly dredged harbors, along watercourses, at the intersections of railroads sprouting. (The Big Money)

March 8/10: The Big Money, pages 1-219

SPECIAL EVENT: Annual Honors College Student Research & Artistic Initiatives Program, March 10th, 2:00pm–Marc Pavilion. Details TBA.

March 15/17: The Big Money, pages 220-end

Week of March 21-25: Spring Break

March 29: Group presentation on The Big Money
31: Library hour
4th essay due, on The Big Money

Then, in a small town in Italy, the first mechanical clock was built. People were spellbound. Later they were horrified. Here was a human invention that quantified the passage of time, that laid ruler and compass to the span on desire, that measured out exactly the moments of a life. It was magical, it was unbearable. ... (Einstein’s Dreams)

April 5/7: Einstein’s Dreams

April 12: Group presentation on Einstein’s Dreams
5th essay due, on Einstein’s Dreams

April 14/19/21: Oral reports on Nobel Laureate projects
19: Nobel Laureate paper due
ASSIGNMENT GUIDELINES

NOBEL LAUREATE PROJECT:

Since 1901 the Nobel Committee has named annual (minus several exceptions) Nobel Laureates in Literature, Science and Peace. The list of honorees includes, as expected, many of the renowned authors, scientists and activists of the twentieth century, but also features acclaimed personages who once so revered are little known today, either for reasons of neglect or shifting trends. Early in the semester students will peruse the list and select a Laureate, famous or forgotten, to study for a focused, serious undertaking in research and writing. Caution is fore-advised, particularly for now obscure Laureates, as securing, for example, out-of-print books from interlibrary loan or other sources will take time. To facilitate research skills students will have guided instruction with library staff and several class meetings in the library.

Planning steps:

1. **Peruse** the Nobel list, the Internet and library holdings to select a Laureate. Any facet of interest may be utilized; era, nationality or theme, for example. The Nobel site is: www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/index.html

2. **Scan** primary works, criticism, biography and related data as background to formulate a plan. Begin thinking about a focus of exploration and securing primary and critical books and articles.

3. **Read** and as you read, remember to think critically and take careful research notes. Index cards are still useful for this purpose, or use a computer, as you prefer. Hopefully, this exercise will lead to a precise, and interesting topic, and even, if creativity and good fortune meet — original. As you develop your topic, keep in mind: “aesthetics, values and authority.” At this stage, a thoughtful, descriptive paragraph and tentative title is expected (Date TBA).

4. **Write** the outline and begin the first draft. As rewriting is a major key to a first-class essay, considerable effort is expected at this stage. The goal is to develop a polished essay.

5. **Bask** — assuming you have worked earnestly and diligently you will have taken your academic skills to a new level of achievement. You should feel good about it.

Option: If you have a special colleague in the class and can agree on a topic as well as a research/writing plan, you may work as a collaborative team, with permission.
MINI-PAPERS:

Choose three of the five course books to write a brief (three pages should suffice) essay, which may be on any topic that reflects the course theme of aesthetics, values or authority—and is directly related to, and relies on the text. Each essay is expected to include a minimum of one secondary source. You may, with permission, choose another interpretive mode other than critical writing. See schedule for due dates.

GROUP PRESENTATIONS:

The assignments for group presentations will be organized in class. As before, students may plan a debate, media event, theatrical experience or other original presentation. Planning, preparation, participation and effectiveness by each member of a group will all be considered a part of the assignment. This semester, presentations will not be graded, with the exception of a penalty grade for a sub-standard response.

CLASS PARTICIPATION:

Students are expected to engage in class discussion, which is facilitated by advance preparation in such ways as noting interesting passages, articulating questions, extra-curricular research and offering connections within the text and/or to other art forms. I will ask students to email me “questions” and/or “ideas” before the class in which a particular text is to be discussed.

NOTE:

We will take advantage, when feasible, of on-campus visiting lecturers, theatre performances and related events. There will be an on-campus sculpture walk, (details to be announced) and “coffee hour” as our schedule permits.

UNIVERSITY AND COURSE POLICIES:

Strict adherence to the university’s code of Academic Integrity is mandatory. Students should be particularly familiar with the section on plagiarism, as well as the Honors College requirements and consequences in regard to violations.

Two absences accompanied by a legitimate excuse and two late arrivals are permitted; more than this is subject to grade penalty.

GRADING:
Nobel Laureate project: 55%
Each of three mini-papers: 12%
Collegiality & Participation: 9%