

How to Teach Thematic Comparative Literature A Curriculum Note for Secondary Teachers

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The Idea of Comparative Literature

Your first question is the hardest to answer: Just what is Thematic Comparative Literature?

Thematic Comparative Literature can be a lot of different things and that is one of the pleasures of it, but it isn't just doing anything you want. We feel that the main core of Thematic Comparative Literature is that in your study of literature you make comparisons across cultures (and languages), comparisons across time, and comparisons between literate and oral traditions. All of the comparisons are guided by a theme.

Literature is one of our best means of understanding minds other than our own. And by learning what others have thought we come to understand our own thought more deeply. This means that the study of literature is usually comparative in some way. You generally compare periods or styles or works written in different forms such as novels, essays, plays and poetry. Normally these comparisons are all done within a single literature such as English literature or Ancient Greek literature.

The first aspect which makes Thematic Comparative Literature different from conventional literature programs is that we emphasize comparisons of literature from different cultural traditions. We have included in our model course works from the 18th Century, 19th Century, and modern American literature including contemporary American ethnic writers. We have Third World contemporary works. We have works from the oral traditions of Ancient Greece, 16th Century China, Ancient Hebrew (the Old Testament), and contemporary Tlingit and Eyak. We also include 19th Century Russia. and modern German works.

Our goal is to provide breadth more than depth. We prefer the broadest possible picture of human response to perennial issues over a narrower and more specialized local focus. By making our comparisons across cultures we like to bring to our own attention the problem of translation and interpretation that we all face with any great work of literature. For most contemporary Americans the language of even Herman Melville in the last century is almost a foreign language but it is easy to forget that. The language of our own Constitution in the 18th Century is hard for many of us to follow. We believe that it is essential for contemporary students to retain (or gain) their fluency with the English of other times as well as the thought and concepts of other times and cultures in order to live meaningfully in our present world of constant cross-cultural contact and crisis.

Finally Thematic Comparative Literature is a response to the inherent biases of many literature programs. The history of literature is often the history of a privileged elite. We try to take into account the shaping forces of gender, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status, both as areas of study and as they influence our understanding and interpretation of literature.

Oral Literature

It may seem strange to you that we emphasize studying both literate and oral traditions in our study of comparative literature. Certainly for most teachers of literature the word literature means written literature (and, of course, that is the original meaning of the word). We emphasize integrating oral literature into Thematic Comparative Literature for four reasons.

In the first place our oldest literatures began as oral literature. The works of Homer in Ancient Greece or of Confucius in Ancient China were based on stories and songs which had come down to them from a much more ancient tradition. Just as James Joyce's *Ulysses* was built upon Homer's *Odyssey*, Homer's story was written down from stories which had been told for centuries before that. And now recently we have learned that the story of Odysseus is based on an even much older bear legend of the people who lived before the prehistoric Greeks.

In other words our contemporary literature has grown out of the seeds of oral literature. To understand our own history we need to understand the way an oral literature works and how it is different from a written literature.

But we shouldn't forget that our oral traditions did not die out with the writings of Homer in Ancient Greece. They have continued to grow right alongside our written literature. We all tell stories and listen to stories during much of our days. Some of us are better at it than others; certainly most of what we chat about you wouldn't want to call literature. But the literature of any period is constantly being fed by this wellspring of the oral tradition and it is as important for us to understand this active oral tradition as it is for us to understand the written past of our literature.

The third reason we emphasize studying oral traditions in our Thematic Comparative Literature program is that there are many active classical oral traditions which are now still functioning, largely still without influence from written literature. If we want to understand the *Iliad* as a work of oral storytelling we don't have to restrict ourselves to speculative theory about life in Ancient Greece. We can compare it to contemporary storytelling in many parts of the world.

Our fourth reason for including works from the oral traditions of the world is our most important. They are great literature in and of themselves. Over centuries of development our written literatures have often drifted into a kind of unreality where criticism and literary theory often seems to be the main reasons for their existence. You sometimes get the feeling that some books are written JUST SO THAT a critic can interpret them. Read *Strong Man* of Frank Johnson from the classics of the Tlingit oral tradition or *Lament for Eyak* of Anna Nelson Harry, the Eyak tradition bearer and you will see works of the deepest human thought which are tuned to the rhythms of the earth and which we as humans can directly understand out of our own human experience without the doubtful benefit of criticism.

Picking a Theme

We use a thematic approach to comparative literature because we believe that the most important reason for reading literature is to think about the conditions of our own lives. Without that concern the study of literature can easily become an arid game of trivial fact.

The best way to pick a theme is to discuss it first with your students. Find out what are important issues for them. Then you can pick the readings so that you can think through together with them how that theme has been dealt with over the years and across cultural groups.

Since you will usually require preparation well in advance of teaching your Thematic Comparative Literature course you will probably need to choose your theme or themes before you've had a chance to discuss it with your students. Some programs choose a single theme for a period as long as a year. We have chosen four themes to provide some variety for the sake of demonstrating a model program. Sooner or later you will find that one of these will drift into another. For us the important thing is that your discussions remain grounded in the concerns of your students.

How Much Reading?

We prefer breadth of coverage to depth of analysis in a particular book and so our model program gives A LOT of reading. To us it is more important for secondary students to see the problem of

alienation from the separate points of view of a 19th Century American, a contemporary Chinese American, a contemporary African, a philosophical modern German, and a traditional Tlingit than it is for them to study any one work for the same time sore analytically. We believe that for most secondary students their reading at this time of life is more a question of opening up windows on new thought than it is a matter of analysis and exhaustive (and exhausting) detail.

Still our model may seem like a lot of reading to expect of your students (or yourself'). Here we'd say what the great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges said in a lecture entitled 'Poetry' in the book *Seven Nights*:

I have tried to disregard as much as possible the history of literature. When my students asked me for a bibliography, I told them, 'A bibliography is unimportant—after all Shakespeare knew nothing of Shakespearean criticism. Why not study the texts directly? If you like the book, fine; if you don't, don't read it.... If you don't feel poetry, if you have no sense of beauty, if a story doesn't make you want to know what happened next, then the author has not written for you. Put it aside. Literature is rich enough to offer you some other author worthy of your attention—or one today unworthy of your attention whom you will read tomorrow.

There are many ways to approach a large reading list. Use any approach that works for you. Read selected portions out loud to the class and ask them to read the rest. Have different students read different portions and then in class piece it together. Have different students read different works and then report on their reading to the class.

In some cases you might want to select one particularly difficult reading to do early in the course and then re-read it later on to give your students the experience of seeing a work from the deeper perspective that comes with discussion and re-reading. The point is to keep the discussions of the theme active. Keep it pertinent to your lives. Let the works of literature go before you let go of the theme. As Borges says, literature is rich enough to offer something else if what you are doing doesn't seem to be working.

The poet Richard Dauenhauer recommends never asking a question to which you know the answer. That is setting up your students for failure. It is a mock exam and they can just about always sniff it out. To start the discussion of each work begin with the open-ended question. What have you noticed in today's reading? All great works of literature are about many things. Never be afraid to explore new themes that come up in the discussion. It is best not to give the study questions to the student before the student reads. There is a tendency for students (and teachers!) to stick too close to the study questions and miss other important themes. The point is always to let the work you are reading direct your discussion, not any preconceived idea of what students should be getting out of it.

But, but, I'm not sure I'm up to this...

Thematic Comparative Literature is really a very new field even though it uses concepts and research tools from long established fields of study, That means that there really isn't anybody who is very well prepared to teach Thematic Comparative Literature at the secondary level. Part of the problem is that we'd like to be the experts in the subjects we teach. We can't really help very much with that except to say there are some very good resources scattered here and there throughout various other fields.

To get a better idea of how to deal with literature that is not English literature almost any literature-in-translation course will help. To get a better background in oral tradition look into writings in the field of folklore. The *Dynamics of Folklore* by Barre Toelken is a good introduction. Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* is a readable study of the differences between literate and oral traditions.

Our main suggestion is to jump right in as soon as you can. Use our model as it is if you like or modify it to suit your situation. Use different themes or substitute readings. If you can locate another teacher or two to work together you can take advantage of the strengths you each have in different areas. Many organizations now provide grant support for teachers who are trying to develop new approaches to literature and the humanities. The state programs of the National Endowment for the Humanities such as the Alaska Humanities Forum may well have sources of support as will your state department of education.

A Model Thematic Comparative Literature Course

In the pages that follow there is a course outline and study guide for a course in Thematic Comparative Literature. It is designed with high school students in mind. With some modifications this course has been used as an introductory college freshman humanities course. With other modifications portions of this model have been used at the middle school level.

Each unit consists of six sections.

Theme essay. This is a brief overview of the theme for the unit to orient you to the main points of discussion.

List of readings. This gives a list of the suggested readings, suggested editions, and the number of pages.

Suggestions for approaching the readings. This gives a suggested reading schedule for the readings.

Study guide. In this section there are detailed study questions for each reading selection.

Paper and report topics. These are suggestions which could be assigned to students or used as a guide for your own topics.

Further related readings. Other readings could be substituted from this list or extra readings could be given to some students.

Thematic Comparative Literature Unit One

Alienation and self-concept

Alienation is often thought of as a modern psychological disorder. It is often said that we have lost our sense of identity because of the great dislocations required by the rise of industrial life, first in Europe and then across the globe. Yet in North America we have lived a life of alienation since Europeans struggled through their first winters huddled close to the shores of the Atlantic. From those first settlers who fled their own homelands either out of fear of persecution or to seek a better choice for themselves elsewhere down to the highly mobile population of America in the 1980's, few of us have not lived out much of our lives among strangers. And in choosing this estrangement from our own homes, again and again, we have made aliens of these communities we have moved into.

It began on the Eastern seaboard where Indians were made aliens in their own homeland by the steady encroachment of Europeans, European culture, European technology, and European law. It began in the Aleutians on the Russian frontier. It began in the great Spanish territories of the West which extended Spanish rule upward from Mexico. As this process spread from Boston in the Massachusetts colony and from Sitka and Unalaska in Alaska, and from the old Spanish pueblos of the Mexican desert, there have been few of us who have not known the loss of roots, the loss of a sense of belonging somewhere, and from a sense that we have lost any identity that we cannot carry in a suitcase.

Who are we as a people? Who am I? In this country where personal freedom has been our founding faith, what freedom do I have to throw off the restraints of society and family to become whoever I want to be? What freedom does my family have to pursue an identity that does not have its roots in Europe?

The literature in this unit deals with the theme of alienation and self-concept. Melville's *Bartleby* is a man who would 'prefer not to'. As to what he would prefer not to do, that includes nearly everything. *Bartleby the Scrivener*, with a great deal of dry humor, gives us a brief portrait of a man who has cut himself off from nearly all society. We see the strange attraction this man has for the narrator who is himself Bartleby's extreme contrast in his love of society.

The experience of alienation is feared as a tremendous loss of a sense of identity and yet virtually all of the world's great religions have urged us to loosen our ties to this world and its value system and seek our identity in a higher set of values. *Siddhartha* by Hesse is a short novel about the early years of a young man who tried to free himself from the claims of his wealthy family and his culture.

The Puritans who established Massachusetts colony chose their alienation from their homeland in England in order to be free to pursue their own interpretation of the Christian scriptures. *The Scarlet Letter* is the story of a woman and two men who suffer the second alienation that comes of violating the moral code of the new settlement.

Hong-Kingston's *China Men* extends the theme of alienation from one's homeland to the situation of the hundreds of thousands of Chinese laborers who moved between China and America, the Gold Mountain, to work in the mines of California and on building the American railroads. She looks through her own experience as a California-born Chinese at her own family and ancestors who, while at a great distance from their homeland and living in a European culture, brought their dried food and seeds to keep alive their sense of cultural identity wherever they might go.

As our world has changed in the past century into a global society, the sense of alienation has come to haunt us in our own houses and in our own communities. Children are educated into ways that are not understood by their elders. Education now, rather than movement and technology, has become a major source of alienation in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. This novel shows a Nigerian young man's struggle to find his own identity after an English education has drastically changed his values and his hopes for his own life apart from his family and community.

Our deepest form of alienation may go beyond the separation of individuals from their society. Many people believe that our deepest alienation is our separation as human beings from the earth and the life of all its inhabitants. *The Woman who Married the Bear* told by Tom Peters is about both kinds of alienation. The action starts with a violation of tabu—a human speaking unkindly about animals. Perhaps as punishment or as an opportunity for growth, the woman enters the world of animals. She marries a bear and has two children. She experiences alienation in the animal world, but upon her return to her own world she realizes that the loneliness and homesickness she experienced away from her people are less than the alienation she experiences in her 're-entry.' She can't go home again. She and her children are not accepted. Her society cannot accept the disruption of a now alien or alienated member. The story ends with violation of another tabu—about teasing animals. The message is that somehow all the people and beings of the earth must strike a balance and learn to live with each other. The story emphasizes our human need to maintain contact and respect for the animals and world around us which sustain our own lives.

List of Readings

Bartleby, the Scrivener, Herman Melville, Penguin Books, 30 pages.
Siddhartha, Hermann Hesse, Bantam Books, 152 pages.
The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Penguin Books, 200 pages.
China Men, Maxine Hong Kingston, Ballantine Books, 303 pages.
No Longer at Ease, Chinua Achebe, Fawcett Books, 159 pages.
The Woman who Married the Bear, Tom Peters. In: *Haa Shuka, Our Ancestors* Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, University of Washington Press, 28 pages.
The Woman who Married the Bear, Frank Dick, Sr. In: *Haa Shuka, Our Ancestors* Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, University of Washington Press, 24 pages.

Suggestions for Approaching the Readings

These books and short stories can be read on the following schedule:

Week one: *Bartleby the Scrivener*
Week Two: *Siddhartha*
Weeks Three and Four: *The Scarlet Letter*
Weeks Five and Six: *China Men*
Week Seven: *No Longer at Ease*
Week Eight: *The Woman Who Married the Bear*

This schedule gives about 80 to 150 pages of reading each week except for the last. The teacher may want to have more time in the last week for developing general themes. The teacher should decide a pacing for the readings so that students do not get behind. The study guide below can be used as a basis for discussions or as a guide for students' papers,

Study Guide

Bartleby, the Scrivener, Herman Melville

The humor in this little story sometimes sneaks up on readers. Some readers really need to read the story twice to get to enjoy it. After that many readers come back and read 'Bartleby' once or twice a year just for fun. Discuss with your students the mix of humor and sadness in Bartleby. Is it possible to tell just what Melville's final attitude is toward Bartleby or the narrator?

Is it possible to say WHY Bartleby would prefer not to?

What effects does Bartleby have on people around him, especially the narrator?

Why does the narrator get so tied up in Bartleby's life? Why can't he just leave him alone?

Siddhartha, Hermann Hesse

A discussion of Buddhism will naturally arise from reading this book. It might be good to prepare a short history of Buddhism and its principal beliefs as preparation.

What does the author mean by the 'self'? What does Siddhartha discover about his self?

What is the source of Siddhartha's alienation?

How does time contribute to alienation?

Compare Siddhartha's alienation from his father with that asked of his followers by Jesus in the Book of Matthew (10:35-37):

For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

For further context, read Matthew, especially 10:5-11:1, especially 10:16ff. Also there are some nice passages in John (16:18-19; 17:14-16; 12:23-26) all of which have to do with the task of being in the world but not of the world, and therefore hated by the world.

The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne

We suggest that students start reading at page 75, at the beginning of Chapter One and skip both the introduction and 'The Custom House'. If there is time some students might want to go back to read those sections. But this is better to do after they have become accustomed to Hawthorne's language by reading the novel.

For some students it will be necessary to discuss the meaning of the letter 'A'. You should not assume that they will know that it means 'adultery' and Hawthorne himself does not say. This, of course, is not an easy subject to discuss under any circumstances. At some point in the discussion you should read Chapter 8, verses 1-11 from the Gospel of John. You can then compare the attitude of Jesus to a woman accused of adultery with the attitude of the townspeople of Boston at the time of the novel.

These questions might also help with the discussion.

Why did Hester Prynne stay in Boston? What would life have been like elsewhere? In other words, did she choose ostracism to avoid complete alienation?

Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth were all born in England, not in the new colony of Massachusetts. They had already chosen this form of alienation from their place of birth. What might have been the reasons?

Why did Hester keep Chillingworth's secret?

Be sure to draw your students' attention to Chapter 13 in which Hawthorne talks about what it will take before women will be able to assume a fair and suitable position in society. This theme is repeated at the beginning of Chapter 18.

China Men, Maxine Hong Kingston

Chinua Achebe in his novel *Things Fall Apart* says, 'There are no stories which are not true.' Hong Kingston in *China Men* has to deal with a history for which she has both too many and too few details. Notice how she often constructs alternative versions and leaves it up to the reader to pick out the 'true' story.

Is *China Men* fiction or biography?

Does Maxine Hong Kingston have a clear sense of who she is? If you think so, what is the evidence in the novel? If you think not, again, what is the evidence in the novel?

In what ways are the *China Men* Hong Kingston writes about alienated? In what ways have they retained their sense of cultural and personal identity?

No Longer at Ease, Chinua Achebe

When Obi Okonkwo goes to school in England it is his village association which pays his way so that he can return and serve his people. His decision to major in English was the first step in his alienation. Discuss with your students what it might mean to someone to major in college in a language that was for them a second language.

Compare and contrast Obi Okonkwo's view of literacy to his father's.

Was Obi the victim of chance in getting caught or might it have been that he hadn't learned the system well enough? In other words, did his deep sense of honor stand in the way of his becoming 'successfully' alienated as so many other officials had?

The Woman Who Married the Bear, Tom Peters
The Woman Who Married the Bear, Frank Dick, Sr.

Often an individual's experiences make him or her an outsider, at home in neither of two groups. Compare Hester and the woman who married the bear, comparing each woman's personal experience to the group experience.

Hester, the woman who married the bear, and her brothers violate tabus. Against whom? And what are the consequences? In the final analysis what are the gains and losses? What is the impact of each woman's experience on her society?

In Tlingit society, the relationship to one's in-laws is ideally powerful and close, and one of great respect. The Bear Husband is not accepted by his wife's brothers. How does this alienate and impact him, and his actions toward his brothers in law?

The Woman Who Married the Bear is from Tlingit oral literature. It was composed and published orally, not in writing. The present versions are transcriptions from tape recordings, and translations into English. The translations try to keep a sense of the style of the original. The aesthetics of oral and written composition are not always the same. What are some of the ways oral composition and written composition differ? What are some things composers of oral and written literature have in common?

'Context' means the setting or background situation of a story. Oral literature is often said to be highly 'contextualized' and written literature highly 'decontextualized'. What do you think about this? What do we as readers of all the works in this unit need to know about the societies from which the literature comes? What things were familiar? Unfamiliar? Confusing? In what ways do we as readers of stories from different times and places and different social settings experience alienation in the act of reading? What do we need to know about the settings to make sense of the stories?

Paper and Report Topics

These readings show that there are many causes of alienation, war, religious devotion, bureaucratic and institutional life, violation of the community's moral codes, movement by force or otherwise into another cultural area, and education. In each case the experience is similar in some ways but not all ways.

The following questions might be useful to stimulate a general discussion of alienation. They might also be used as theme or report topics.

1. Alienation is often thought of as a modern problem. Compare and contrast the sense of alienation experienced by someone such as Siddhartha or Jesus which is sought for religious ends and the sense of alienation of *Bartleby*, or *Obi Okonkwo*.
2. The woman who married the bear and *Obi Okonkwo* were people who had gone away from their own people and learned about life as lived by others. They returned with knowledge of that other world. In each case there was a need for the community they had left to find a suitable response to them as they returned. To what extent is the sense of alienation a problem of the individual who has gone out and to what extent is alienation a problem of the community to which they return? Who has the responsibility for bridging the gap?
3. Hawthorne says that Hester Prynne had achieved an independence of thinking out of her long period of alienation from the society of the town of Boston. Is it possible, do you think, to be an independent thinker WITHOUT being alienated?
4. Hong Kingston's father was one of the last of the scholars trained in the classical Confucian literacy. Chinua Achebe is one of the first of Nigerians to write so eloquently in English, the language of a foreign power. Compare and contrast the experience of Hong Kingston's father and *Obi Okonkwo* with their education as it affected their later lives.
5. Hester Prynne had a daughter, Pearl. *Obi Okonkwo*'s father was himself an outcast for having chosen the Christian religion. Hong Kingston's father had a literate daughter. The woman who married the bear had two children. When individuals are alienated from society, what is the effect of this alienation on their children? Do those children develop a self-concept that sets them apart from their parents as well as from the rest of society? Or might they try harder than others to find acceptance into society? In what ways do the children of alienated individuals become a further source of alienation?

Further Related Readings

Some students may want to do additional reading. The following books also treat alienation and self-concept as central themes. Some of these books may be out of print but should be available through your library.

Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe
Woman Warrior, Maxine Hong Kingston
Walden, Henry David Thoreau

Murphy, Samuel Beckett
Ceremony, Leslie Silko
House Made of Dawn, Scott Nomaday
Nausea, Jean Paul Sartre
You Can't Go Home Again, Thomas Wolfe
The Stranger, Albert Camus
No-No Boy, John Okada
Catcher in the Rye, J. D. Salinger
Death of Jim Loney, James Welch
Winter in the Blood, James Welch
Soldier's Home, Ernest Hemingway

Thematic Comparative Literature Unit Two

Pride and arrogance, appearance and reality

Pride and arrogance have been with us since our beginning, though cultures differ in the extent to which they encourage or discourage the display of pride. People have sought to escape from the drabness of life and the certainty of death through pride in themselves and their heritage, through seeking immortality, through science and reason. Yet arrogance often leads to disgrace or even death.

Men sometimes think they can do things others can't do. They draw on supernatural powers to perform feats of strength, bravery, intellect, or will. In their dealings with the gods they sometimes have difficulty sorting out appearance and reality. Some are humble and believe all their strengths to be gifts from the gods. Others seem to be unaware that their powers are provided by Heaven for a specific purpose, and think that they have the right to use and abuse them as they will. Some get into trouble trying to divine the will of Heaven or tamper with their fate.

Since the Enlightenment, some people have felt that everything in the Universe could be explained rationally. This notion led to the arrogance of some who thought they had better explanations than others. This feeling of superiority gave them special privileges or so they thought. The ideas of freedom and equality developed together with the idea of a Superman who was above all the rules of ordinary society. This has sometimes led to an excessive individualism based on too strong an acceptance of the rule of reason.

Our country is founded on pride in the principles of reason, liberty, and justice. Yet the exercise of individualism in the pursuit of happiness has often been reserved for a privileged few. Many see in our national policy an arrogance that decides the affairs of other nations in our own self interest.

In extending pride in our national heritage to pride in our way of life, are we denying other nations and other species their right to survival? As the proud owner of a new car, am I arrogantly ignoring the resources consumed in its making?

The literature in this unit deals with the theme of pride and arrogance, appearance and reality. An offense to Zeus has Odysseus wandering the Earth, proud of his family and estate and furious at the thought that rivals are trying to take away what is his. He faces numerous obstacles and dangers, aided by the goddess Athene, who bolsters his appearance and his physical prowess according to her own purposes. In his arrogance he defies the gods, who delay his homecoming.

Monkey starts on his own odyssey in search of immortality. Like Odysseus, his arrogance depends on the support of the gods. He tries to rise too high above his station by eating the fruit of immortality and is punished by being immobilized for 500 years.

Then the Bhodisattva sends him on a mission to India with the priest Tripitaka. He overcomes obstacles and meets allies along the way. He resolves other people's troubles with violence but also with humor and continues on his mission to bring back texts that teach humility and reverence for all living things.

The man in Frank Johnson's *Strong Man* is a misfit disdained by other men. He secretly develops his strength with the aid of a spirit helper. When the time comes to test his strength against a sea lion he succeeds where his boastful uncle has failed.

Lake Dwarves by Anna Nelson Harry reminds us that everything is relative. Everyone has strengths as well as weaknesses that others lack. When a man stumbles on some dwarves hunting mice as if they are bear he picks one up and tucks him into his belt. For him they are playthings, but when they cross the lake in their canoes he cannot follow because it is too deep.

Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* is a victim of the Age of Reason. A little over a hundred years ago, the growth of factories brought many people to the cities, where it was not easy to earn a living. Some, like Raskolnikov, thought that they could get ahead by stepping over the bodies of others who had less talent. With his faith in Reason he does not anticipate that his own conscience would prevent him from simply taking advantage of the old woman he murders. Most of the novel is about his shifting sense of reality as he sorts out the consequences of his crime.

It is said that the arrogance of Western science has led to widespread destruction of the Earth and its living forms. Long before Dostoyevsky, Sophocles was aware of the problem of trying to divine the will of the gods and knowing too much. Oedipus tempts his fate by insisting on finding out who his mother and father really are. By trying to find out what is causing the plague among his people he uncovers the secret of his own destiny and punishes himself severely.

List of Readings

- The Odyssey*, Homer, Tr. Richmond Lattimore, Harper and Row, 365 pages.
Monkey, Wu Ch'eng-en, Tr. Arthur Waley, Grove Press, 305 pages.
Strong Man, Frank Johnson, Tr. In; *Haa Shuka*, Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, University of Washington Press, 14 pages.
Lake Dwarves, Anna Nelson Harry, In *In Honor of Eyak*, Tr. Michael Krauss, Alaska Native Language Center, 9 pages.
Crime and Punishment, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Tr. David Magarshack, Penguin, 559 pages.
Oedipus Rex, Sophocles, Tr. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, 78 pages.

Suggestions for Approaching the Readings

These books can be read on the following schedule:

- Weeks One and Two: *The Odyssey*
Weeks Three and Four: *Monkey*
Week Five: *Strong Man* and *Lake Dwarves*
Weeks Five, Six and Seven: *Crime and Punishment*
Week Eight: *Oedipus Rex*

This schedule gives about 170 pages of reading each week. While this may seem like a lot of reading much of it is absorbing and moves quickly. You can, of course, alter this time schedule to be sure the longer works get enough time.

A number of points are likely to surface in these readings. The distinction between works from an oral tradition such as *Strong Man* and *Lake Dwarves* and works from a highly literate tradition such as *Crime and Punishment* form one contrast. But *The Odyssey* and *Monkey* form an interesting middle ground, being works which were originally oral but were 'crystallized' into their written form by an 'author'.

Many of these works are very episodic in nature, from *The Odyssey* which doesn't get down to 'the plot' until very near the end to *Crime and Punishment* which gives the principle action very near the beginning. It might be useful to have an introductory discussion about the differences between narratives of physical actions and narratives of psychological conditions.

Study Guide

The Odyssey, Homer

As he tries to return home, again and again Odysseus encounters someone he hasn't seen in the many years away. Of all of these, only Argus his old dog recognizes him immediately. Why do you suppose Odysseus puts everyone he meets to some test to see if they recognize him instead of just saying who he is?

In Ancient Greek stories such as *The Odyssey* the gods are constantly taking the shape of a human or a bird when they approach people. The gods also often speak to people in their dreams. Do you feel that in modern times we have a better understanding of reality or how to understand dreams than the Ancient Greeks had?

How does the pride of Odysseus get him in trouble on the way home from Troy?

Ancient Greeks seem to have spent a lot of their time in long-winded arguments or in contests of physical ability. They seemed to show a lot of arrogance in these contests and get away with it. At other times the gods or other men would punish them for their pride. The Greek concept of *hubris* 'excessive pride' is a tricky one. As you read the *Odyssey* try to see what makes some cases of pride *hubris* and other cases of pride just the right amount.

Monkey, Wu Ch'eng-en

Monkey is an expert at hoodwinking people, from the Immortals in Heaven to people on earth. It seems like every time he meets up with someone he gets into a long argument or even a battle and only after they are all exhausted does he bother to find out who he is fighting with. Then it often turns out that it is really an ally who has been waiting for years to assist Monkey and Tripitaka on their journey to the West. What is the significance of the repeated error on Monkey's part?

The high point for Buddhism in China was this trip of HsuanTsang (Tripitaka) to India to bring back the scriptures of Buddhism to China. When Wu Ch'eng-en wrote *Monkey* he adopted a very lighthearted tone to write about this serious event. Why do you suppose he did that?

Is Monkey a religious character? Is *Monkey* a religious novel?

Some people have thought that *Monkey* was an allegorical novel with Tripitaka, Monkey, Pigsy, and Sandy representing different aspects of the human character in its search for truth. Do you think this is what's going on in *Monkey*?

Strong Man, Frank Johnson

People think that *Strong Man* is a misfit; they laugh at him and ridicule him. Meanwhile he is privately developing his strength which he only shows at last when it is necessary in killing the huge sea lion. Discuss the pros and cons of developing your strengths privately and being careful not to display them to others. What is the appropriate way to deal with the ridicule of others? What are the dangers of showing off your strengths at the wrong time?

Lake Dwarves, Anna Nelson Harry

The little Lake People are all absorbed and exhausted by their mouse hunt when a man comes along and makes fun of their work which looks pretty puny to him. He's after bear. But he forgets that there might be someone else that much bigger than him who would think his efforts are pretty puny. Discuss ways in which our pride looks appropriate in some situations and ridiculous in others.

Crime and Punishment, Fyodor Dostoyevsky

The great modern sin seems to be the pride and arrogance of individualism. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov is obsessed with the 'great heroes' of history who have transgressed moral and ethical codes of their times to become heroes. He tests himself for greatness by murdering an old pawnbroker whom he thinks is worthless anyway. The rest of the book is about the consequences of his pride. Discuss the difference between Jesus who advocated leaving one's family and following him and Raskolnikov who also advocated going against family and country to achieve 'great things'.

When is it appropriate for an individual to go against the moral code of his people and his times?

Near the end of *Crime and Punishment* Sonia and Dunya are worried that Raskolnikov may have 'lost all his pride' and committed suicide. Discuss this idea that either excessive pride or total loss of pride are equally harmful to the individual.

Oedipus Rex, Sophocles

This is probably the best known example in literature of the tragic results of *hubris*, excessive pride. In this play pride and arrogance are directly tied to questions of appearance and reality. Oedipus is blinded to his own guilt by his great pride. Teiresias, the blind prophet, warns him away from trying to learn too much. Is the lesson here that we should avoid pride? Or is it that we should not try to learn too much about ourselves if we want to be happy?

Paper and Report Topics

Pride and arrogance have been subjects in all the great literature of the world. This is probably because so much of human tragedy results from human pride. The readings have come out of several of the world's great traditions of literature. The following questions can be used to stimulate comparisons across these traditions:

1. Odysseus and Oedipus display their strengths and suffer for it. Monkey shows off all the time but only suffers minor calamities because of it. Strong Man hides his strength and only shows it off when it is necessary and he is rewarded by marriage and acceptance into his community. The pride of the big man in Lake Dwarves is shown to be no bigger than the pride of the little man by comparison. Raskolnikov exercises his arrogance and suffers deeply. Discuss Ancient Greek, Chinese, Tlingit and modern Western views of pride and arrogance and their consequences.
2. Of the various views of pride and arrogance shown in these writings, which do you think gives the best recommendation for living your own life?
3. Odysseus is punished for denying the gods an offering that they feel is their due. Monkey is punished for stealing and eating the fruit of immortality. Both of them go on a long journey as a result of their misdeeds. They both display arrogance in their encounters with creatures they encounter, yet the results of their arrogance are quite different because of different underlying assumptions. Compare the *Odyssey* and *Monkey* in terms of these underlying assumptions regarding relationships among mortals and immortals.
4. Oedipus punishes himself by trying to know too much. In his case it is not Zeus but the God of Reason who brings about his downfall. Raskolnikov also believes in Reason and commits a crime in the name of Rationality to advance himself. The God of Reason fails him as well and brings about his gradual undoing. Compare Oedipus and Raskolnikov and the results of their pride and arrogance and their illusions and delusions.

Further Related Readings

Some students may want to do additional reading. The following books also treat the theme of pride and arrogance/appearance and reality. Some of these books may be out of print but should be available through your library.

MacBeth, William Shakespeare
King Lear, William Shakespeare
Great Expectations, Charles Dickens
Oedipus at Colonus, Sophocles
Antigone, Sophocles
As I Lay Dying, William Faulkner
Gulliver's Travels, Jonathan Swift
The Greek Myths: 1, Robert Graves
The Greek Myths: 2, Robert Graves
A Continuous Harmony, Wendell Berry

Thematic Comparative Literature Unit Three

Conflict of loyalty, duty

The best that humans achieve is always accomplished when we manage to get beyond our own selfish interests and respond to a sense of duty toward others. Our greatest heroes and religious leaders have given their lives in duty to others. We are often called by duty to our families, our friends, our countries or our religions to act beyond our self-interest. A problem arises, though, when our sense of duty to one of these comes into conflict with another.

Huckleberry Finn ends up riding a raft with Jim, a runaway slave. He feels it is his duty to society and the law to turn Jim in. At the same time as he and Jim become friends he feels it would be a violation of this friendship to expose him. As we look back on our country's period of slavery it is easy for us now to say that slavery was wrong and so Huckleberry Finn would be right in violating the law to save his friend. At the time of the novel it was not such an easy decision. It is worth asking ourselves what similar kinds of conflicts a modern Huckleberry Finn might experience.

Such conflicts of loyalty are as old as mankind. More than two thousand years before Watergate Confucius agonized over whether an honest man could work in a corrupt government. His follower, Mencius, emphasizes that the great man tries to do what is right in any particular situation and not to go to extremes, in a false sense of duty.

The oldest story in this collection is the story of Abraham and Isaac from the *Book of Genesis*. When God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac it takes a tremendous amount of faith to believe because God has already told him that he will father many nations through his son Isaac. Abraham's conflict is between his love for his son and his love for God as well as between two apparently conflicting messages from God.

When a young woman violates a tabu by calling the glacier in *Glacier Bay History*, someone must pay with a life. The conflict in this story is between sacrificing the older woman, her grandmother, who is not herself the guilty party so that the younger woman can be saved, or sacrificing the younger woman and losing the generations of children who can yet be born of her.

The story of Kaats' tells of a man who is caught between his loyalty to his wife, the Brown Bear Woman, and his own people, the humans. She treats him kindly and he is grateful for it and has Brown Bear children. Yet in the end he is caught between his two identities. While we should not push the symbolism too far, Kaats' seems to stand for the need to avoid conflict between human and animal worlds.

Beginning in 1939 thousands of Americans were confronted by terrible conflicts of loyalty. As a nation with many immigrants we found some Americans torn between a sense of loyalty to their homelands and loyalty to their new country. Germans, Italians and Japanese especially found themselves either confused about their loyalty or even if not confused, falsely labelled as disloyal because our country was at war with the country of their own origin. *No-no Boy* is the story of one Japanese-American's troubled life in this period.

But even our country itself was founded among deep questions of duty and conflict of loyalty. In our break with England we finally resolved that our duty was first to the new country being founded on this continent. At the same time we had to face the difficult question of how we would resolve internal conflicts between federal and state powers. What began as a conflict between the colonies and England was transferred to a more local conflict between the central government and the state government. This conflict in many ways has not yet been resolved. The Federalist

Papers were the discussion that went on around the formation of the U. S. Constitution as we tried to grope our way towards a balanced resolution of these basic conflicts in powers.

List of Readings

Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain, Puffin Books, 281 pages.
Mencius, Mencius, Tr. D. C. Lau, Penguin Books, 150 pages.
The Analects, Confucius, Tr. D. C. Lau, Penguin Books, 100 pages.
The Story of Abraham and Isaac, Genesis 16:1-22:19, *The Bible*.
Glacier Bay History, Susie James, In *Haa Shuka*, Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, University of Washington Press, 16 pages.
Glacier Bay History, Amy Marvin, In *Haa Shuka*, Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, University of Washington Press, 32 pages.
Kaats', J. B. Fawcett, In *Haa Shuka*, Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, University of Washington Press, 26 pages.
No-no Boy, John Okada, University of Washington Press, 251 pages.
The Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson (with John Adams and Benjamin Franklin), Mentor, 2 pages.
The Federalist Papers, Thomas Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, Mentor, 150 pages.

Suggestions for Approaching the Readings

These books can be read on the following schedule:

Weeks One and Two: *Huckleberry Finn*
Weeks Three to Five: *Mencius* and *Confucius*
Week Six: *Abraham and Isaac*, *Glacier Bay History*, and *Kaats'*
Week Seven: *No-no Boy*
Week Eight: *The Declaration of Independence* and *The Federalist Papers*

This schedule gives about 150 pages of reading each week. While this may seem like a lot of reading much of it is absorbing and moves quickly. You can, of course, alter this time schedule to be sure the longer works get enough time.

A number of points are likely to surface in these readings. *Huckleberry Finn* catches the eye immediately with Twain's use of a variety of American dialects of English. This book would provide a good opportunity to talk about differences in language that show up in the classics, both in the originals and in translations.

The Confucian system of scholarship and government was one of the longest-lived continuous literate traditions, beginning with the works of these ancients and continuing down to the fall of the Qing Dynasty in the Chinese Revolution of 1911. While it is difficult to date the *Book of Genesis* in *The Bible*, it has also been with us a long, long time. Students should think about ways in which our lives have changed very drastically since the times of Confucius, Mencius, and the author of *Genesis* and ways in which we are still very much like them.

Glacier Bay History and *Kaats'* are works from a modern oral tradition that compare well with those of the ancient traditions of Greece or of *The Book of Genesis*. It might be useful to talk about ways in which an oral tradition differs from a literate tradition.

Study Guide

Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain

When Huckleberry Finn runs away from his Pap with Jim, his mind is set on getting away from Pap. But as the two drift down toward Cairo where Jim might stand a chance of becoming a free man, Huck's conscience starts to bother him. A conflict of loyalty has come up in his mind between what he thinks is the right way to behave, turning Jim in, and going against all reason in his mind and helping Jim escape. What other conflicts of loyalty does Huck face? How does he resolve them?

Huck's Pap resents him getting above his own father through his education. Discuss this resentment and conflict that comes up when the younger generation begins to get beyond the older generation through education. What is lost in this process? Who do you feel most sympathy for, the younger or older generation?

Tom Sawyer, just like his model in classical literature, Don Quixote, is in love with legends in books and is always trying to get life to live up to them, even if he has to stretch reality some in doing it. Huckleberry Finn isn't so loyal to the reality of books. So throughout the book there is a conflict between different kinds of duty; duty to the people who have cared for him (Widow Douglas, Miss Watson), his father (Pap), his best childhood friend (Tom Sawyer), his comrade in escaping (Jim), and his sense of 'Christian' duty. Discuss several scenes in which these different duties come into conflict. What becomes of Huck's resolve to do 'what's handiest at the time?' (p. 95)

Mencius, Mencius
The Analects, Confucius

The system of education and government in China established on Confucian ideals lasted for more than 2000 years. What is the primary duty according to Confucius and his follower Mencius?

Why did Mencius (and Confucius) so dislike the 'village honest man'?

Did Confucius expect to find many people who could be truly virtuous?

Should a person work for someone who does not show respect and, if so, under what conditions and for how long?

A democratic society such as ours depends on the majority behaving with an educated judgment and a sense of fairness to others. In Confucian society very few people were educated and decisions were made by rulers. Discuss ways in which an individual's duty might be different in these two kinds of society.

Mencius said (p. 130), 'A great man need not keep his word nor does he necessarily see his action through to the end. He aims only at what is right.' Does this mean that 'a great man' is free to do whatever he chooses?

The Story of Abraham and Isaac, Genesis 16:1-22:19

God told Abraham that he would be the father of nations and yet Abraham did not have a son until he was nearly 100 years old. Then God told him to take his only son, Isaac, out and kill him as a sacrifice. Imagine Abraham's confusion between these conflicting revelations of God. What does this story say about loyalty to one's sense of duty?

Glacier Bay History, Susie James
Glacier Bay History, Amy Marvin

In this story the granddaughter, Kaasteen, violates a tabu of her people by calling to the Glacier which results in the destruction of the village and the local ecosystem. Someone then has to pay

the price of violating respect for these natural and spiritual forces. In the version by Susie James the grandmother, Shaawat Seek' stays behind in place of the young granddaughter, Kaasteen. The woman in the ice is the older woman and the emphasis is placed on the sacrifice of the grandmother, in the Tlingit tradition of 'standing in', and accepting the responsibility not only for one's own actions, but the actions of others. In the version by Amy Marvin it is Kaasteen who stays behind.

Kaats', J. B. Fawcett

In this story a man crosses the delicate boundary between humans and animals. Over in the world of Brown Bear Woman he is treated well and with kindness which he respects and returns to her. He ultimately comes into conflict with his human family who regard the Brown Bear with suspicion. What does this story tell us about the relationship between trust and respect? As humans where does our duty lie? Now can we carry out this duty while minimizing conflict between humans and animals?

This man's experience is much like that of people who go to live with people from other cultural or ethnic backgrounds. How do you feel that experience of interethnic relationships compares to this story?

No-no Boy, Frank Okada

Ichiro's mother expects him to get a good education so he can go back to Japan and be of use to his country. The U. S. government puts him into a relocation camp for being Japanese and then imprisons him for refusing to serve in the army. His loyalty to his mother gets him into trouble not only with the law, but with the society he returns to from prison, including his own brother. Discuss his re-entry into life in Seattle.

Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson (with John Adams and Benjamin Franklin)

Now we know how the American Revolution came out in the end. At the time of the Revolution people must have been very frightened of the whole thing. The years preceding the *Declaration of Independence* were years of intense conflicts of loyalty for the American colonists. As British subjects their loyalty was to the English crown. As Americans their newly developed loyalty was to the new country being formed on this continent. Read the *Declaration of Independence* from the point of view of a people who were finding it very difficult to break with their own British heritage.

The Federalist Papers, Thomas Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay

The central problem in creating a new country was in establishing a fair means of distributing powers among states and between the states and the central or federal government. What are the political and economic reasons for loyalty to a central government? What are the reasons for loyalty to state governments?

Are the conditions the same now as they were at the time of the *Declaration of Independence* and *The Federalist Papers* or has the conflict of loyalty between federal government and state government changed?

Have relations between the United States and other countries changed in any important ways since the establishment of the Constitution? If you think there are changes, do you think any new questions of conflict of loyalty have come up?

Paper and Report Topics

Conflict of loyalty is a theme that is as old as the Bible and as recent as negotiations for oil resources. *Huckleberry Finn* was written right at the moment in American history when we ourselves began to take seriously that 'all men are created equal.' In a sense in American's first duty is to the principle of equality among humans. Confucius and Mencius taught that a man's first duty is to his parents, next to his wife, then his first son and the rest of his immediate family, then extended family and so forth on out in lesser degrees to the rest of the world. The story of Abraham and Isaac teaches that Abraham's first duty was to God even if that should mean the sacrifice of his own son, Isaac. *Glacier Bay History* and *Kaats'* teach that humans have a deep duty to respect the animal, the natural world. *No-no Boy* shows a man caught between loyalties to two countries, the country of his family and the country of his present residence. The early Americans were caught in a similar conflict between loyalty to England and loyalty to the new country, and within that new country they were caught between loyalty to the central government and the state governments.

1. To what do you believe you owe your main duty? –an ideal? –your parents? –your wife and children? –the natural world? –your clan? or your country? What are your reasons for believing this?
2. Imagine that in drafting the U. S. Constitution or in writing the *Declaration of Independence* our founding fathers had been able to ask Confucius or Mencius in for consultation. Where would Confucius or Mencius have approved this new government and where would they have found it lacking?
3. Abraham was told by god to give up his only son Isaac in sacrifice. Huckleberry Finn's conscience told him to give up Jim as a runaway slave. The grandmother in *Glacier Bay History* gives herself up in sacrifice for her granddaughter.

How are these three conflicts of loyalty alike and how are they different?

Further Related Readings

Some students may want to do additional reading. The following books also treat the themes of conflict of loyalty and duty. Some of these books may be out of print but should be available through your library.

Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe
The Brothers Karamazov, Fyodor Dostoyevsky
Paradise Lost, John Milton
The Politics, Aristotle
Democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville
The Prince, Machiavelli

Thematic Comparative Literature Unit Four

Revenge, obsession and compassion

Revenge and obsession have become major themes in modern international relations. The 'superpower' nations seem obsessed with an endless cycle of actions designed to 'pay back' the others for insults to their status. In our personal lives we have been caught up in endless legal battles from divorce to small claims court which also seem obsessed with ideas of revenge for insults we have suffered.

We have been taught that it is important to carry things through to the end. We are taught to finish what we start. And we have a deep sense of duty that supports this. Virtually all cultures teach this as a valuable character trait. But when this trait gets carried to an extreme it becomes an obsession. Mencius, the ancient Chinese sage, said that 'a great man need not keep his word nor does he necessarily see his actions through to the end. He aims only at what is right.' This is the balance that is difficult to learn and maintain.

Throughout the ages our great writers have warned us of the dangers of obsession with an idea or a course of action. Confucius warned against this dangerous characteristic as strongly as Homer. And in more recent times, Faulkner joins Melville in warning us.

Among the kinds of obsession we experience one of the most destructive is revenge. The pattern for revenge is familiar. Someone is insulted and becomes angry. He or she then plots to get even with the insulter. In this obsession, the avenger, however, loses all of his or her own sense of dignity and, at least in the cases we are reading here, even loses his or her life.

Obsession is the negative side of duty, revenge is the negative side of justice. Compassion is the value that returns things to balance. Addie Sundren lies dying at the beginning of William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying*. Cash, her son, is building her coffin and her husband, Anse, plans to take her for burial to Jefferson in fulfilment of her dying wish. As obstacle piles up on obstacle, Anse in his obsession to get Addie's body to Jefferson plods ahead, whatever the cost. As we read it becomes clearer that Addie has used this last wish to play upon Anse's obsessive sense of duty to work her revenge for a boring life of misery married to Anse.

The Iliad is one of the world's oldest written war stories. It is a small section from the story of the famous Trojan War. It begins nine years into the siege of Troy. The Achaeans have been camped on the beach below the impregnable walls of the City of Troy. They have failed for nine years to enter Troy. The Trojans have failed to drive the Achaeans from the siege.

The Achaeans are waging war on the Trojans because one of the princes of Troy, Alexandros (also known as Paris), has violated the hospitality of the Achaean, Menelaos, and run off with his wife, Helen. Menelaos, his brother Agamemnon, and the rest are there to work their revenge on Paris and on Troy, his home.

Agamemnon insults his greatest ally warrior, Achilleus, by taking away the captured woman, Briseus. Achilleus is furious over this insult and stops fighting so that Agamemnon will suffer at the hands of the Trojans and beg Achilleus to return to the war. The *Iliad* is about this quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilleus and the price of the revenge of Achilleus.

Anyone who has lived in the North in the summer wonders frequently what sort of revenge the mosquitos are carrying out against man. *Mosquito* by Robert Zuboff tells this famous story of double revenge. A man avenges the death of his brother but becomes obsessed with this

revenge and tries to make it as painful as possible. This obsession of his is what has released this eternal revenge of the cannibal on mankind.

Captain Ahab has had his leg bitten off by the great white sperm whale everyone calls Moby Dick. The novel begins as Ahab's ship is being prepared to undertake the long and almost impossible voyage to track down and kill Moby Dick in the trackless oceans of the world. Ahab's revenge on Moby Dick obsesses him as it becomes his only reason for existence. He draws his crew with him into this personal revenge on the white whale to their ultimate destruction.

List of Readings

As I Lay Dying, William Faulkner, Vintage Books, 250 pages.
The Iliad, Homer, Tr. Robert Fitzgerald, Anchor Press, 594 pages.
Mosquito, Robert Zuboff, In *Haa Shuka*, Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, University of Washington Press, 10 pages.
Moby Dick, Herman Melville, University of California Press, 576 pages.

Suggestions for Approaching the Readings

These books can be read on the following schedule:

Weeks One and Two: *As I Lay Dying*
Weeks Three to Five: *The Iliad*
Week Six: *Mosquito* and begin *Moby Dick*
Week Six to Eight: *Moby Dick*

This schedule gives about 150 pages of reading each week. While this may seem like a lot of reading much of it is absorbing and moves quickly. You can, of course, alter this time schedule to be sure the longer works get enough time.

Study Guide

As I Lay Dying, William Faulkner

It doesn't take the reader too many chapters to realize that each chapter of this book takes the point of view of a particular character, Cash, Darl, Vardaman, Dewey Dell and so forth, including the central pivot, the chapter by Addie Bundren herself. For most students it would be a useful exercise to prepare for this constantly changing point of view. You might want to make a chart of the characters putting in their ages, and relationships to Addie Bundren, the central character of the novel.

This novel might be called Anse's Obsession because of the tremendous obstacles Anse Bundren surmounts to get his dead wife, Addie, to burial in Jefferson. But it might also be called Addie's Revenge because of the way she forces Anse to uproot himself and undertake the trip. Discuss these two views of the novel. Which seems most appropriate to you?

What agendas did other characters in the story have that become obsessive? Think of Vardaman's fish, Jewel's horse, Cash's coffin, Dewey Dell's package. What about Darl? Is there any connection among these separate obsessions?

The Iliad, Homer

Homer tells us in the first line that *The Iliad* is about anger and the fight between Achilles and Agamemnon. On the surface it is about greed. It is a quarrel over who owns the captured girl Briseus. Beneath that it is also about pride. Achilles has been insulted by Agamemnon and

plans and gets his revenge. He makes them all come to him and beg him to return to the battle before they are all destroyed.

The Iliad has many small stories of greed, pride, obsession, and revenge, but also compassion. In the end Achilles shows compassion, compassion for the other Achaeans and even compassion for Hektor's father, Priam. Where does it get him? He returns to battle knowing that he will die there before the walls of Troy.

This book is behind so much of the literature of the past 2,000 years that it might be worth the time to read the other stories surrounding the Trojan war as background.

Some questions might help students in their reading:

What is the Greek conception of the gods? What is the role of the gods in the war?

How do the Greeks feel men should relate to their gods? What are their responsibilities and duties and what is the price of ignoring them?

How much freedom do the Greeks feel men have in their actions?

Mosquito, Robert Zuboff

There are many versions of this story throughout the North. A man goes out to kill the cannibal who has killed his older brother. But as in many other cases of revenge, he is not satisfied with just killing the cannibal. He wants to cause him as much pain as he possibly can. And now we all pay the price of this man's obsession with inflicting painful revenge. In the form of Mosquito the cannibal returns to harm us.

Moby Dick, Herman Melville

It is hard for us to imagine what it was like one hundred years ago when few people had ever seen a whale of any kind, dead or alive. The whales that had been seen alive were always seen at a distance and then only as a spout, the flukes, or the arch of the back. Now with underwater movies most of us have very clear pictures of what whales look like.

In *Moby Dick* Melville uses this great mystery of the whale at his time to make his story. It works two ways: the great mystery of the whale and especially of the great white whale, Moby Dick, symbolizes Ahab's search and revenge. It also gives Melville the material for a long leisurely tour of the world of whales. The book has 135 chapters. And yet we don't sight Moby Dick until Chapter 133! In this Melville nicely symbolizes the long journey out from Nantucket and the long wait Ahab has in which to work his revenge.

In reading *Moby Dick* be sure to enjoy the by-ways of the trip. Watch that students don't get so obsessed with the whale and the final conflict that they don't enjoy the trip out.

You might want to discuss what the whale Moby Dick symbolizes. Melville gives clues along the way. He himself says that the most important chapter of the entire book is Chapter 44, 'The Chart'. Be sure to believe him and read it well.

Also be sure to look up Ishmael and Ahab in the Bible. Why do you suppose Melville chose those names for his narrator and his tragic character?

Paper and Report Topics

There is something about the nature of revenge. It often takes a long, long story to tell it. Why do you suppose that is so?

In *Moby Dick*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *The Iliad*, Ahab, Addie, and Achilles plot their revenges and then let them play out on their victims. Of course, in each case the hero taking revenge is dead before it's all over. Mosquito seems to be a double revenge; one played out quickly, the other still being played out with every mosquito bite we suffer.

Compare the four readings: What is the nature of the offense?

How is the revenge carried out? What are the consequences for both the avenger and the one revenged? What are the consequences for others involved with the avenger?

Find in each reading the point at which compassion could have been shown. What would have been the consequences?

Further Related Readings

Some students may want to do additional reading. The following books also treat the themes of greed and obsession, compassion and revenge. Some of these books may be out of print but should be available through your library.

The Pearl, John Steinbeck

Hamlet, William Shakespeare

MacBeth, William Shakespeare

The Old Man and the Sea, Ernest Hemingway

The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Greek Myths: 1, Robert Graves

The Greek Myths: 2, Robert Graves

Naatsilanei, Willie Marks, In *Haa Shuka, Our Ancestors*, Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer

Naatsilanei, J. D. Fawcett, In *Haa Shuka, Our Ancestors*, Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer

Note on the Model Course

This model course in Thematic Comparative Literature was first developed under a contract with the Sealaska Heritage Foundation to Ron Scollon and Suzie Scollon. A parallel set of courses entitled 'Teaching Comparative Literature I and II' were offered by the University of Alaska, Juneau in both 1985/86 and 1996/87 for teachers who planned to teach comparative literature. The instructors were Richard Dauenhauer and Ron Scollon. A shorter version was taught by Ron Scollon under the title 'The Axe Handle Curriculum' in the University of Alaska Summer Session 1986.

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