

## **LT 122 The Gods of Literature**

Seminar Leader: Jeffrey Champlin  
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Office Hours: Thursday, 3:30-4:30; K24, 204

### **Course Description**

This course offers a comparative examination of texts that wrestle with gods across history and cultures. While literary studies since the 19th century have largely considered religious texts as objects of nostalgia in a disenchanted age, a number of questions arise with new urgency in our current global and post-secular context. What rhetorical and narrative structures does literature employ to portray humanity's troubled connection to a higher power? What does it mean to read a text in a religious manner, rather than a literary manner? How has literary study sought to distinguish itself from its models of religious commentary? As we pursue these questions, we will be particularly attentive to themes of gender, environment, power, morality, transcendence, and secularization. Discussions and writing will incorporate elements of "mindful pedagogy," short secularized exercises drawn largely from religious traditions that train attention in different ways. (Close Reading and Literary History)

### **Requirements**

We will make the most of the liberal arts seminar format by developing ideas and analysis through a process of discussion and writing. Toward that end, each student will contribute a short presentation and write a midterm and final paper. Overall class participation is also essential, and will be evaluated based on consistently preparing the readings and class engagement.

### **Academic Integrity**

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook. Please be advised that the use of AI for papers is prohibited in the student handbook. Any use of AI will be announced and discussed in class. Feel free to ask me if you have questions.

### **Attendance**

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

### **Assignments and Assessment**

**Class presentation:** Students will present on one text as per a sign-up sheet. Each presentation of about 15 minutes will examine key passages of your choice as guided by a commentary handout that I will provide. In turn, you will provide your own handout for the class that focuses your reading of the text. You are encouraged to write your **midterm or final papers** on the text that you present on. In this manner, your essay can expand on the insights and questions that arose from your class contribution and the discussion that follows your readings.

**Writing Assignments:** Students will write two papers. The first will be focused on one text and the second will develop a longer comparative analysis of two texts we have studied in the class. The midterm paper will be 2,000 words, the final will be 3,000 words.

### **Policy on Late Submission of Papers**

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

### **Grade Breakdown**

Class participation (quality and quantity): 25%

Presentation: 20%

Midterm essay (2000 words): 25%

Final essay (3000 words): 30%

### **Course Materials**

Please purchase the following **books**:

*Bhagavad Gita: Song of God*. Translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood. Vedanta, 1987. (Please use this translation, but other editions are fine.)

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Random House, 1994. (Other editions are also fine.)

Butler, Octavia, *Parable of the Sower*. Headline, 2019. (Other editions are also fine.)

The following texts are in the **course reader** that all students should purchase:

Alter, Robert and Frank Kermode, eds. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Harvard University Press, 1987. (Selections).

Atherton, Mark, ed. *Hildegard of Bingen: Selected Writings*. Penguin Books, 2001. (Selections).

Eliot, Thomas Stearns, ed. *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*. Yale University Press, 2006, pp. 57-74.

Hafiz, *Poems from the Divan of Hafiz*. William Heinemann, 1928. (Selections).

Hölderlin, Friedrich. *Hyperion and Selected Poems*. Continuum, 1990. (Selections).

Smith, John H. *Dialogues between Faith and Reason: The Death and Return of God in Modern German Thought*. Cornell University Press, 2011, pp. 1-22.

Other texts will be distributed through **google classroom**:

Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"

bell hooks, "Spiritual Matters in the Classroom," In: *Teaching Community*. Routledge, 2003, pp. 175-183.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Duino Elegies*. Translated by A. Poulin, Jr. Ecco, 2005. (Selections.)

Suggs, M. Jack, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, and James R. Mueller, eds. *The Oxford Study Bible: Revised English Bible with Apocrypha*. Oxford University Press, 1992. (Selections.)

## **Schedule**

### **I. Gods before Literature**

Week 1

January 30

Opening discussion and selected poems.

February 1

Alter, Robert and Frank Kermode, eds. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Harvard University Press, 1987. pp.1-8. ("General Introduction.")

bell hooks, "Spiritual Matters in the Classroom," In: *Teaching Community*. Routledge, 2003, pp. 175-183.

Smith, John H. *Dialogues between Faith and Reason: The Death and Return of God in Modern German Thought*. Cornell University Press, 2011, pp. 1-22.

Week 2

February 6

Psalms (Selections)

Alter, Robert and Frank Kermode, eds. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Harvard University Press, 1987, pp 244-262 ("Psalms.")

February 8

Job; Matthew 5-7 ("Sermon on the Mount")

Background reading (optional): Alter, Robert and Frank Kermode, eds. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Harvard University Press, 1987, pp 11-35. ("The Old Testament.")

Week 3

February 13

*Bhagavad Gita: Song of God*. Chapters 1-6.

February 15

*Bhagavad Gita: Song of God*. Chapters 7-12.

Week 4

February 20

*Bhagavad Gita: Song of God*. Chapters 13-18.

February 22

Hafiz, *Poems from the Divan of Hafiz*. (Selections).

Week 5

February 27

Atherton, Mark, ed. *Hildegard of Bingen: Selected Writings*. Penguin Books, 2001. (Selections).

February 29

Atherton, Mark, ed. *Hildegard of Bingen: Selected Writings*. Penguin Books, 2001. (Selections).

Week 6

March 5

Meister Eckhart (Selections)

March 7

Texts suggested by student (To be distributed through Google Classroom)

## II. Gods in Literature

Week 7

March 12

March 12  
Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"

March 14  
Hölderlin, Friedrich. *Hyperion and Selected Poems*. Continuum, 1990. (Selections).

Week 8  
March 19  
Karoline von Günderrode. (Selections TBA)

March 21  
Fri, March 22, 2024 **Midterm Paper due by email by midnight.**

**SPRING BREAK Mon, Mar. 25 - Mon, Apr. 1, 2024**

### **III. Gods of Literature**

Week 9  
April 2 Eliot, "The Wasteland." In: Eliot, Thomas Stearns, ed. *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*. Yale University Press, 2006, pp. 57-74.

April 4 Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Duino Elegies*. Translated by A. Poulin, Jr. Ecco, 2005. (Selections.)

Week 10  
April 9 Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Random House, 1994. Chapters 1-8.

April 11 Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Random House, 1994. Chapters 9-17.

Week 11  
April 16 Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Random House, 1994. Chapters 18-25.

April 18  
Simone Weil. (Selections TBA)

Week 12  
April 23 Butler, Octavia, *Parable of the Sower*. Chapters 1-6.

April 25 Butler, Octavia, *Parable of the Sower*. Chapters 7-11.

Week 13  
April 30 Butler, Octavia, *Parable of the Sower*. Chapters 12-16.

May 2 Butler, Octavia, *Parable of the Sower*. Chapters 17- Epilogue.

May 7, Closing discussion

Thursday, May 9, 2024 Federal Holiday, No class

Week 14

14, 16 Completion Week

**Fri, May 17, 2024 Final Paper due by email by midnight.**