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Humanities 122: Pursuit of Happiness

This course will introduce students to the history of ideas in Western and Eastern cultures through art, literature, philosophy, religion, drama, and music. Students will develop the ability to think critically about and reflect on the history of ideas from many cultures. Students should also begin to see how these ideas have influenced the culture in which they live. Recognition of key styles of art, literature, music, and philosophy will also be emphasized while students explore and develop their own sense of aesthetic taste and individual creativity.

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Theme

The theme of this course is “happiness.” In essence, the course theme is about purpose, obligation, fulfillment, and ethical conduct. Happiness and misery are at the core of human experience; they are truths of existence that are not bounded by time, culture, or religion.

This structure allows an instructor to consider questions of happiness, justice, evil, and truth as addressed by various philosophers, writers, and artists. For example, one might compare similarities between the dramas of *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*. Another advantage of a unifying theme is that it successfully crosses cultural boundaries. For example, the hero Beowulf might be compared with Basho; Confucius and Thomas Jefferson might be contrasted; and the advice of the Upanishads might be compared with that of Aristotle.

Happiness, justice, and truth transcend cultural boundaries: “Truth is one; the sages speak of it by many names” (Joseph Campbell quoting the Vedas).

A unifying theme allows students to begin to make connections on an analytical and synthetic level between seemingly diverse or unrelated literary and artistic materials. When students are given a topic to look for and recognize in works of art, literature, and philosophy, they can begin to weave a structure of their own related to the meanings of these works. Theme provides both an anchor and a seed for understanding the complexities and layers of meaning held within great works of art or literature. It is a solid basis and groundwork for initial understanding. Later through this understanding, a student can find an especially interesting and engaging aspect of a piece that will lead the student to develop some sort of structure for analyzing that piece or even for creating their own creative work. Later still these structures may be dismissed, and new considerations may be called for to fully understand a piece.

“Happiness” as a theme in this course can be brought into relief against the theme of “misery.” This course focuses on the time periods of the Great Plague, the Renaissance, the age of the European explorers, the age of absolute monarchy, and the ages of reason and revolution. Medieval European ideas of the physical world as a “vale of tears”—a testing ground in preparation for the hereafter—might more aptly be considered as a period without “worldly happiness.” “Living for the day,” asceticism, and considerations regarding the body as the locus of sin can provide contrasting examples of how individuals might deal with the most difficult of situations.

The ideas of Eastern cultures should also be highlighted; their emphasis on proper conduct, ethics, duty, and social obligations can be considered in relation to happiness. How various cultures define happiness can also be considered; specifically, how important is the individual in these cultures as compared with the European tradition?

Texts

The following texts are used in this course:

Fiero, Gloria K. *The Humanistic Tradition, Book 2: Medieval Europe and the World Beyond*.

Fiero, Gloria K. *The Humanistic Tradition, Book 3: The European Renaissance, the Reformation, and Global Encounter*.

Fiero, Gloria K. *The Humanistic Tradition, Book 4: Faith, Reason, and Power in the Early Modern World*.

Beowulf: A Verse Translation, trans. Seamus Heaney, ed. Daniel Donoghue. New York: Norton, 2002.

Dante Alighieri. *Dante, The Divine Comedy, Vol. 1: The Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa. New York: Penguin, 1984.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*, ed. Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Folger, 1992.

The texts in Fiero’s *Humanistic Tradition* books provide the historical structure and context within which these great literary works were created; for example, the transition from the classical Greco-Roman culture to medieval culture; the role of art in medieval Europe; the

effects of the Great Plague; art, philosophy, and religion in India, China, and Japan during the medieval period; and developments in art, music, and philosophy during the Renaissance and the age of Enlightenment in Europe.

Beowulf, *The Divine Comedy*, and *Hamlet* represent concrete examples of the literature of these periods. Reading these texts allows students to see for themselves how the structures of storytelling and drama have been continually influenced by these great works.

Problems and Solutions

1. *Students may have difficulty coping with a large volume of reading material*

- Provide students with a reading guide that highlights specific pages or chapters.
- Think about the most important aspects of the material based on the theme of the course.

2. *Students may be unfamiliar with the literary, artistic, religious, and/or philosophical references made in Great Books texts*

- Before starting a work in the Great Books, offer a lecture on the information needed for students to understand the piece.
- Give a brief and specific lecture on classical Greco-Roman style in literature and the arts.
- Compare and contrast classical humanism with medieval religious traditions.
- Compare the arts and literature from several cultures.

3. *Taking students' vocabulary and reading skills into consideration*

- On the first day of class, have students write a few sentences about themselves: their favorite books, films, art, hobbies, etc.
- Read these immediately and use them to assess the students' writing and communication abilities.
- Base your approach to the course material on the unique makeup of each class.
- Consider students' shared interests when engaging them with the course material.
- Select texts with a glossary and find definitions together in class as a game, group, or individual activity.

4. *Stressing effective communication of ideas by students*

- Send students to the Writing Center for pointers and remedial assistance when needed.
- Encourage student to enrich their vocabulary choices.
- Require students to give examples from their readings to clarify and validate their points.

5. *Moving from general to specific analysis of the material*

- The instructor can model this behavior in class.
- When a statement, evaluation, or critical point is raised, have the students read the example in their books.
- Use specific phrases and images to clarify examples.

6. *Students may have difficulty understanding dense, complex, “old fashioned” writing*

- In discussions, ask conversational questions about the material; for example, what do you think the author means here? Or, what is this all about?
- If you sense confusion, frustration, or misunderstanding, summarize the meaning of the text in straightforward language.
- Address both the literal and symbolic meaning of the text.
- Ask students to focus on an image or topic that interests them within the piece. For example: How might one know the difference between “a Hawk and a Handsaw”?

7. *Appropriate expression of opinion*

- Clarify for students that listening to and expressing opinions is an integral part of the intellectual analysis of course material and that toleration of a variety of ideas is key.
- If you notice a discussion becoming too heated or personal, offer redirection and guidance. This is especially likely to occur with topics related to religion, politics, science, and culture.
- Some students may have little or no experience with discussion of these topics, so instructor guidance is very valuable.

8. *Engaging the students with the material*

- Relating “ancient” material to modern-day experiences helps students see the relevance of the material. For example, literature and art from the period of the Great Plague in Europe can be related to modern experiences of disease epidemics.
- Consider how people react in similar ways regardless of the era.
- Relate the great mysteries of life and death and the emotions of joy, fear, sadness, grief, and even silliness that can be seen in great works of art and literature.
- Suggest that the students form predictions about the pieces they are reading and then compare how their predictions match up with the actual structure of the piece.
- Have students compose questions they would like answered after reading the material.

9. *Emotional vs. intellectual reactions*

- Help students engage in “metacognition”; essentially, this is thinking about how you are thinking.
- Develop the ability to step back from your reaction to a piece and notice that reaction; this bit of distance is often where one can engage in the most meaningful analysis of a piece.
- This skill allows the students to structure their thoughts and express them verbally or in a written form.
- Personal insight about one’s own reactions helps with full participation in the course material without frustration and confusion.

10. *Physical or mental challenges*

- Be willing to provide photocopies of notes and assignments to students who need them.
- Work with the teacher’s assistant to ensure all effective methods of communication are being utilized.
- Consider alternative methods of assessment that can be substituted for the more traditional tests and papers; for example, verbal tests, creative projects, and activities to assess learning.

Course Structure

The structure of this course is enhanced by following a basic historical chronology. While I rarely ask for specific historical dates, it is good for students to understand the historical period or era from which a work or art, literature or philosophy derives. For example, it makes logical sense to relate changes in culture to the devastation of the Great Plague in Europe, or to compare how the tenets of Buddhism differ from the ideals of Confucius in Chinese culture. I also notice that students find there is a kind of “pendulum swing” in historical eras that correspond to the arts. One era may be more humanistic and “worldly,” while another may be more mystical and “otherworldly.” Examples from the texts can be emphasized to demonstrate these cultural tendencies.

Sample Questions for Discussion and Exams

1. How might the hero Beowulf define happiness during or after his adventures? Consider Grendel, Grendel’s Mother, and the Dragon: would their definition of happiness be opposed to the hero’s definition?
2. How could anyone experience happiness during the time of the Great Plague? Use examples from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* to clarify your thoughts.
3. Considering courtly love and illicit medieval romance, how might one find true happiness?

4. Clarify these terms using both religious and secular examples: bliss, ecstasy, joy, and contentment.
5. Describe Dante's ranking of sin and crime. What might it be like to live with no hope of ever attaining happiness? Consider the shades of the "virtuous non-Christians and the philosophers" from canto 4 of the *Inferno*.
6. Describe the ultimate misery of Satan and all those in the ninth circle of hell. How has happiness abandoned them?
7. Consider the joy of Petrarch when he learns that Cicero also copied the orations of others. Can this kind of happiness be called purely intellectual? (Refer to Petrarch's letter to Lapo da Castiglionchio in Fiero's *Humanistic Tradition*, 5, 3, reading 3.5.)
8. Can revenge make one truly happy? Give examples from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and/or *Othello*.
9. Discuss the characters of Ophelia and Queen Gertrude. How might women's happiness and misery differ from that of men?
10. Can happiness be defined as the absence of misery?

Sample Essay or Paper Topics

Rather than give specific topics, I give three main categories for papers and then let students develop specific topics. I do have students submit topics for approval, and I offer guidance as needed. For this course, students need to choose one of the three texts read in the course and write about it in one of the following three ways:

Philosophical—analyze the historical, mythical, or political aspects of the piece using the theme of happiness as the focal point

Informative—do research on factual information surrounding a piece or author.

Creative—write a story, play, or narrative poem based on the style of one of the pieces of literature discussed in class emphasizing the theme of "happiness."

Any of the discussion questions given in the preceding section can be used as essay or presentation topics. In addition to a paper, each student should also develop a 10-minute presentation using the above categories.

Quotations on Happiness vs. Misery

The instructor can present the following quotes to the class to begin discussions of "happiness."

Demand much from yourself and little from others and you will prevent discontent.

—Confucius, *Analects*, 15.15

It is one's self [*atman*] which one should see and hear, and on which one should reflect and concentrate. For when one has seen and heard one's self, when one has reflected and concentrated on one's self, one knows this whole world.

—Upanishads

The old pond, ah!
A frog jumps in-
Kerr- plop!

—Haiku by Basho

Be wise, decant your wine: condense
Large aims to fit
Life's cramped circumference.
We talk, time flies, you've said it!
Make hay today, tomorrow rates no credit.

—Horace, "Carpe Diem"

Thus ordinary or vulgar people conceive it [happiness] to be pleasure and accordingly approve a life of enjoyment . . . Cultivated and practical people, on the other hand, identify happiness with honor, as honor is the general end of political life.

—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

So that in nature we find three principle causes of quarrel: First, competition; Secondly, diffidence; Thirdly, glory.

—Hobbes, *Leviathan*

The young man approached and took off the veil with a trembling hand. What joy! What surprise! He thought he saw Miss Cunegonde, he saw her indeed! it was she herself. His strength failed him, he could not utter a word, but fell down at her feet.

—Voltaire, *Candide*, chapter 7

We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

—Jefferson, Declaration of Independence

Secondary Materials

These books are full of interesting poems and philosophical insights:

Powell, James N. *The Tao of Symbols*. Quill, New York .1982

Milosz, Czeslaw. *A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry*._Harcourt Brace, New York. 1996

I have found films to be especially useful for helping students connect with the material. Here are my current favorites:

The 13th Warrior. Directed by John Mc Tiernan. Touchstone, 1999. This film is based on Michael Crichton's *The Eaters of the Dead*, a rational and historical example of the origins of the Beowulf story cycle.

The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey. Directed by Vincent Ward. New Zealand Film Commission, 1989. This film shows the life of medieval peasants and the horrors of the Great Plague and is a wonderful fantasy. It also elegantly fulfills the mythic hero cycle.

What Dreams May Come. Directed by Vincent Ward. 1998. This film blends Eastern and Western classical and medieval motifs into a rich view of the afterlife. It has stunning visuals that can be clearly linked to Dante's visions of hell.

Hamlet. Directed by Mel Gibson. 1990. Gibson gives an excellent performance that highlights Hamlet as the crown jewel in an actor's career.

Smoke Signals. Directed by Chris Erye. 1998. This film is based on Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto's Fist Fight in Heaven*. It is a story that humanizes and dispels racial stereotypes while fulfilling mythic structures of atonement and release.