

The Quest for Ethnic, Cultural, and National Identities in Literature
ENGL 2008; Fall, 2017
Section TR9, code # 34883
3 hours; 3 credits

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 8:00-9:00 & 12:30-1:30 and Thursdays 8:00-9:00 in 1420 Ingersoll

Class meetings: Tuesdays and Thursdays 9:30-10:45 in Room 3408 Boylan Hall

General Description of the Course:

This course will examine the “quest for ethnic and national identity in literature” through the reading and study of five key novels: *The Mystic Masseur* by V. S. Naipaul (1957), *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1982), *Absurdistan: A Novel* by Gary Shteyngart (2006), *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy (2008), and *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez (2010). We will approach these novels through the theme of the absurd in fiction. The absurd, according to *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, is “the state or condition in which man exists in an irrational and meaningless universe in which man’s life has no meaning outside his own existence.” We will begin our study of the theme of the absurd by examining first the work of Albert Camus, through his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus.” We will then look at how Camus translates this vision of the absurd into fiction in his powerful novel *The Stranger*. We will use this theme to frame our discussion of the novels.

We will look at the intersection of the absurd with how each of these novels portrays an ethnic, cultural, or national identity. We will look for elements of the absurd in each of the novels while at the same time taking into account how each author uses fiction to depict the national and ethnic circumstances of the different countries portrayed: Naipaul’s Trinidad, Marquez’s Columbia, Shteyngart’s Russia, Roy’s India, and Alvarez’s the Dominican Republic.

While focusing on the absurd as an overarching theme, we will nevertheless emphasize the elements of fiction, being most intent to see how such aspects as the development and manipulation of a narrative point-of-view, the creation of fictional characters, the handling of dialogue, the use of detail, and the effort to achieve a sense of realism are accomplished in each of these works of fiction. Mostly we will try to enjoy the novels that we will read while learning something about how fiction works and how the theme of the absurd can enrich our understanding and appreciation of literature.

Students will write a two to three page response paper for each of the novels, due on the day we start reading that novel. In addition, there will be one oral presentation on one of the novels based on a slightly longer response paper (4 to 5 pages). There will also be a term paper, a midterm, and a final. The reading load for this course is quite heavy so students are encouraged to read ahead.

Course Objectives:

By the end of this course you should

- demonstrate a knowledge of several novels, and of their historical, social, and cultural backgrounds;
 - recognize the impact of cultural, economic, political, and social environments upon language, and especially upon the development of fiction in various countries.
 - show knowledge of works by female authors and authors of color;
 - demonstrate how reading writing speaking, listening, viewing, and thinking are interrelated;
 - show knowledge of works of literary theory and criticism ;
 - use a wide range of writing strategies to generate meaning and to clarify understanding.
- (Course objectives adapted from NCTE guidelines)

Required Texts (available in the BC Bookstore):

The Novels:

- Albert Camus. *The Stranger*, Vintage Books (2012; Originally Published in 1942)
- V. S. Naipaul, *The Mystic Masseur*, Vintage Books, 2002.
- Gabriel Garcia Marquez. *Chronicle Of A Death Foretold*, Vintage Books, 1982.
- Gary Shteyngart, *Absurdistan A Novel*, Random House, 2006.
- Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, Random House, 2008.
- Julia Alvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Algonquin Books, 2010

Secondary Texts:

- Neil Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, Manchester University Press, 2006.
- Albert Camus and Justin O'Brien , *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, Vintage Books, 1991.

I will assign a variety of other critical essays on the novels we will read.

Course Schedule:

1. Tuesday, August 29: Introductions, backgrounds, preview of the texts
2. * Thursday, August 31: *The Stranger*
3. Tuesday, September 5th: *The Stranger*
4. Thursday, September 7: *The Stranger*
5. Tuesday, September 12: *The Stranger*
6. *Thursday, September 14: *The Mystic Masseur*
- 7 Tuesday, September 19: *The Mystic Masseur*
(note that Tuesday 9/19 is a conversion day and follows a Thursday schedule)
8. Tuesday, September 26: *The Mystic Masseur*
9. Thursday, September 28: *The Mystic Masseur*
10. Tuesday, October 3: *The Mystic Masseur*
11. *Thursday, October 5: *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*
12. Tuesday, October 10: *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*
13. Thursday, October 12: *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

14. Tuesday, October 17: *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*
15. *Thursday, October 19: *Absurdistan*
16. Tuesday, October 24: *Absurdistan*
17. Thursday, October 26: *Absurdistan*
18. Tuesday, October 31: *Absurdistan*
19. Thursday, November 2: *Absurdistan*
20. *Tuesday, November 7: *The God of Small Things*
21. Thursday, November 9: *The God of Small Things*
22. Tuesday, November 14: *The God of Small Things*
23. Thursday, November 16: *The God of Small Things*
- (note that Tuesday 11/21 is a conversion day and follows a Friday schedule)
24. *Tuesday, November 28: *In the Time of the Butterflies*
25. **Thursday, November 30: *In the Time of the Butterflies*
26. Tuesday, December 5: *In the Time of the Butterflies*
27. Thursday, December 7: *In the Time of the Butterflies*
28. Tuesday, December 12: Review

*** Final Exam: On Thursday, December 14 from 8:00 to 10:00. Exam schedule available here: <http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/academics/schools/naturalsciences/undergraduate/computers/forstudents.php>

Note: key, participation, assignments and grading adapted from Professor Ellen Tremper's sample syllabus

Key

*--response paper due

**--term paper due

***--final exam.

Attendance and Participation:

Students must attend regularly, arrive on time and must be prepared to participate, having done the assigned work. Participation will count for 10% of the overall grade for the course. Your class participation will be judged on the basis of your questions to presenters, your respect for various points of view, and your attentiveness to the discussion (people who do not like to speak frequently will not be penalized, but you should make an effort to participate). I also expect that your participation will reflect that you have done the reading for each class. You will be allowed 3 excused absences. To get an excused absence you must send me an email explaining your absence within a week of the absence. Excessive absences can cost you most of the entire 10 points assigned for attendance and participation.

Assignments:

Papers:

Students will write a response paper of two to three pages each time we begin a new novel. Students will write one term paper of about 5 pages, with four books and/or journal articles in the bibliography. Paper assignments must be handed in when due. Late written work will not be accepted for grading.

Conventions for Written Work:

Typed work should be in Times New Roman, 12 pt font, double spaced with 1 inch margins top, bottom, left, and right. Papers must be printed and stapled. The top left hand corner of the first page should list your name, the number and section of this class (ENGL 2008 TR11), the title of the assignment (e.g., “Response Paper on *The Stranger*, by Albert Camus”), and the date. You should also give each of your response papers and your term paper a title, centered and underlined on the first page, that reflects your major focus or thesis in the research paper. Your papers should use basic MLA format. You can find a sample paper using MLA format on the Purdue OWL at: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/media/pdf/20090701095636_747.pdf.

Revisions of Response Papers: You will be allowed to hand in a revised response paper for a revised grade. A revised paper must be handed in together with the original paper within two weeks after the original paper is returned to you. There will be no revision allowed for the term paper, which will be due on November 30.

Presentations:

Students will make one oral presentation, based on a response paper, of 5-10 minutes. Class members will respond to student presenter; this response will constitute the beginning of our discussion of the book.

Exams:

Final exam: There will be an in-class final exam (date, time and room TBA). You will write two essays (you will have a choice of two topics for each of the essays you will write) of 2-3 pages each; you will have to write about every book we have read (approximately half the books will be covered in one essay, the other half in the second)

Grading:

Grades will be based on the following percentages:

Attendance & class participation-10%

6 response papers-30%

term paper-30%

final examination-30%

There will be no INC (incomplete) grades assigned. Your grade in this class will be based on the work that you do from the first day of class to the final exam.

Evaluation criteria for written work and presentations:

From a list by Lewis Hyde, edited by Sue Lonoff, with thanks to Richard Marius’s writing handbook.

The Unsatisfactory Paper.

The D or F paper either has no thesis or else it has one that is strikingly vague, broad, or uninteresting. There is little indication that the writer understands the material being presented.

The paragraphs do not hold together; ideas do not develop from sentence to sentence. This paper

usually repeats the same thoughts again and again, perhaps in slightly different language but often in the same words. The D or F paper is filled with mechanical faults, errors in grammar, and errors in spelling.

The C Paper.

The C paper has a thesis, but it is vague and broad, or else it is uninteresting or obvious. It does not advance an argument that anyone might care to debate. "Henry James wrote some interesting novels." "Modern cities are interesting places."

The thesis in the C paper often hangs on some personal opinion. If the writer is a recognized authority, such an expression of personal taste may be noteworthy, but writers gain authority not merely by expressing their tastes but by justifying them. Personal opinion is often the engine that drives an argument, but opinion by itself is never sufficient. It must be defended.

The C paper rarely uses evidence well; sometimes it does not use evidence at all. Even if it has a clear and interesting thesis, a paper with insufficient supporting evidence is a C paper.

The C paper often has mechanical faults, errors in grammar and spelling, but please note: a paper without such flaws may still be a C paper.

The B Paper.

The reader of a B paper knows exactly what the author wants to say. It is well organized, it presents a worthwhile and interesting idea, and the idea is supported by sound evidence presented in a neat and orderly way. Some of the sentences may not be elegant, but they are clear, and in them thought follows naturally on thought. The paragraphs may be unwieldy now and then, but they are organized around one main idea. The reader does not have to read a paragraph two or three times to get the thought that the writer is trying to convey.

The B paper is always mechanically correct. The spelling is good, and the punctuation is accurate. Above all, the paper makes sense throughout. It has a thesis that is limited and worth arguing. It does not contain unexpected digressions, and it ends by keeping the promise to argue and inform that the writer makes in the beginning.

The A Paper.

The A paper has all the good qualities of the B paper, but in addition it is lively, well paced, interesting, even exciting. The paper has style. Everything in it seems to fit the thesis exactly. It may have a proofreading error or two, or even a misspelled word, but the reader feels that these errors are the consequence of the normal accidents all good writers encounter. Reading the paper, we can feel a mind at work. We are convinced that the writer cares for his or her ideas, and about the language that carries them.

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Note on our Blackboard Website:

If you already have a CUNY portal account, your Blackboard course sites should be listed on your Blackboard page when you log on. If you do not have a CUNY portal account you can register for one at portal.cuny.edu. I would like to use our Blackboard site for some online

small-group discussion of our texts, and for posting assignments and grades. There will be some useful links on the External Links page.

Decorum:

Throughout the semester there will be a great deal of in-class discussion, in small groups and in the larger class. In addition, I have set up our Blackboard page and will require you to post responses to what we have been reading and to each other's comments. You might also have occasion to send e-mails to me or to other members of our class about the work we are doing. All of these interactions should be governed by high standards of politeness and respect for each other. Nothing less is acceptable.

Cell phones:

Your cell phone should be turned off before you enter the classroom. If there is a need for it to remain on, please keep it silent and do not respond to messages in the classroom—step out if you need to. Texting during class is specifically forbidden.

Statement on the University's policy on Academic Integrity:

The faculty and administration of Brooklyn College support an environment free from cheating and plagiarism. Each student is responsible for being aware of what constitutes cheating and plagiarism and for avoiding both. The complete text of the CUNY Academic Integrity Policy and the Brooklyn College procedure for implementing that policy can be found at this site: <http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/about/initiatives.php>

If a faculty member suspects a violation of academic integrity and, upon investigation, confirms that violation, or if the student admits the violation, the faculty member MUST report the violation. Cheating and/or plagiarism will put you at risk of failing this class.

Statement in Reference to the Center for Student Disability Services:

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations students must first be registered with the Center for Student Disability Services. Students who have a documented disability or suspect they may have a disability are invited to set up an appointment with the Director of the Center for Student Disability Services, Ms. Valerie Stewart-Lovell at 718-951-5538. The Center is located in 138 Roosevelt Hall. If you have already registered with the Center for Student Disability Services please provide me with the course accommodation form and discuss your specific accommodation with me.

The state law regarding nonattendance because of religious beliefs:

You should check this on page 64 in the 2015-2016 Undergraduate Bulletin http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/off_registrar/2015-2016_Undergraduate_Bulletin.pdf

Information Regarding College Deadlines and Regulations:

See the Fall 2017 Calendar at:

<http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/about/administration/enrollment/registrar/bulletins/fall17.php>