

Intermediate Honors Seminar: The Mythic Truth

English 20003-01

Instructor: Michael Twomey

Office: 329 Muller

Hours: MWF 2-3 and by appointment

Course web site: <http://themythictruth.wetpaint.com/>

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SYLLABUS FOR FALL 2009

TEXTS:

- Erdoes, Richard, and Alfonso Ortiz. *American Indian Myths and Legends* (Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library) (Pantheon, 1985). **ISBN-13:** 978-0394740188.
- Hitakonanu'laxk. *The Grandfathers Speak: Native American Folk Tales of the Lenape People* (International Folk Tale Series) (Interlink Publishing Group, 1994). **ISBN-13:** 978-1566561280.
- Snorri Sturluson. *The Prose Edda*. Trans. Jesse Byock (Penguin Classics, 2006). **ISBN-13:** 978-0140447552.
- Anon. *The Poetic Edda*. Trans. Carolyne Larrington (Oxford World's Classics) (Oxford University Press, 1996). **ISBN-13:** 978-0199538386.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The words “mythic” and “truth” in the course title are deliberately ambiguous. Mythic truth could be a lie. It could be an ideological belief that people have clung to long after it has lost meaning. But it could also be an ancient truth that we modern people have lost touch with. The title is ambiguous because myth is, and its ambiguity, like its ancientness, is one reason that myth continues to fascinate us.

Myths constitute one of the most ancient and enduring forms of human expression. The first literature, history, philosophy, psychology, and religion are embodied in myths, and to this day works of literature and art reflect the themes, concerns, and even the expressive styles of myth. The modern academic disciplines of anthropology, art history, history, literature, philosophy, psychology, and religion have all contributed to modern thinking about mythology. I think of this course as an exploration of these major issues:

1. What do we mean when we say “myth”? In this course we will consider questions about the origin and oral transmission of myths together with theoretical perspectives from the past century.
2. What do (or did) myths mean to the people who created them, and what do they mean to us? This means studying myths in historical and in contemporary terms.
3. We will study examples primarily from two mythologies: Native American and Norse. Comparison of two cultures will enable us to see the universality of certain critical concepts – for example, the trickster figure, who is a feature not only of Norse mythology (i.e., Loki), but also of Native American mythology (i.e., coyote).

We'll become acquainted with the myths themselves and some of the major theories about myth via discussion of the readings in our text and in handouts and on the web. Via papers and reports, you will have the opportunity to make connections between theories

of myth and mythologies on the one hand, and modern adaptations of myth in forms such as films, graphic novels, and urban folktales on the other.

I'm planning three field trips: (1) The Peachtown Festival of Native American culture, Wells College, September 19 (drivers needed); (2) An overnight to a museum of Native American culture in the East or in Canada (destinations to be prioritized by the class); (3) a visit to the Icelandic Collection at Cornell University. There will be at least one guest speaker: Prof. Jack Rossen will speak with us about the archeological dig near Wells College. I am working on getting someone to talk with us about Norse myth and/or culture.

I am also planning a "ritual feast" at my house, at which we will also recite myths to each other.

REQUIREMENTS AND POLICIES:

2) Written Work:

- **"Homework"**: These will vary from 1-2 page mini-essays to responses to the readings to creating your own myths. I'll consider them part of your class participation, and I'll grade them via a system of check marks. They are required, and I will comment on them; so do take them seriously and don't neglect them. There will be about one every other week. I will distribute guidelines with each assignment.
- Two **5-page essays**. I will hand out assignments and deadlines at least 7-10 days before the due date for each essay. There will be one essay in each half of the course. You will have a chance to make the topics original in some way.
- One 20-minute **presentation** about myth. Think of the presentation as a "treasure hunt" in which you dig for gold about a topic that interests you. I want students to come up with their own topics, but I can make suggestions if necessary. Everyone is required to have conference with me 24 hours or more before the presentation. I will grade the conference on the basis of preparation. There will be 10 presentations in the first half of the semester and 10 in the second half. You must commit to a schedule by the end of the second week of class and you must commit to a topic no later than two weeks before your presentation.
- Term project: All students will create a wiki about myth using Wetpaint. URL: <http://www.wetpaint.com/wiki>
- Assignments in this course will be based on readings in the texts, on handouts, on your own research, and on the course web page. Please guard against plagiarism. The penalty for plagiarism is a grade of F in the course, which I will mitigate to F on the assignment for students who agree to sign an admission of academic dishonesty. If you have any questions about plagiarism, speak with me or consult Volume VII of the Ithaca College Policy Manual at http://www.ithaca.edu/attorney/policies/vol7/Volume_7-70104.htm
- In compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, reasonable accommodation will be provided to students with documented disabilities on a case by case basis. Students must

register with the Office of Academic Support Services and provide appropriate documentation to the college before any academic adjustment will be provided.

3) Attendance: I follow the college's attendance policy (current *Undergraduate Catalog*, p. 290). Accordingly, absences due to a religious observance are not penalized. However, I ask that out of courtesy, students notify me a week in advance of a religious absence. Likewise, absences due to "a verifiable family or individual health emergency, or to a required appearance in a court of law" are not penalized. "The student or a family member/legal guardian may report the absence to the Office of Student Affairs and Campus Life, which will notify the student's dean's office..." which will notify me. The policy about all other absences is set by the instructor. My policy is that I permit four absences for any reason—illness, team sports, field trips in another class, and so on. I do not ask for excuse notes, reasons for the absence, etc. How you use these four absences is your business. However, for absences after the fourth absence (excluding the two cases mentioned above), your grade will go down by one-third of a letter. Athletes must speak with me at the very beginning of the term and provide written evidence of all possible absences due to their sport. Please read this policy carefully, and please re-read this policy before asking me about an absence. After absences of any kind, you should ask me about what you have missed in class.

4) Final Grade (total of 100%):

- 25% for participation and homework. Be aware that participation doesn't mean talking all the time: it means contributing constructively and thoughtfully to the conversation. It also means coming to class on time, treating other students (and me) courteously, and showing an investment in the work of the class.
- 30% for essays.
- 25% for the presentation.
- 30% for the wiki.
- Total of 110% to be converted to an A-F scale.