English 01:350:200 (3 credits) Barry Qualls

Core AHp English

**Once Upon a Time: Why We Tell Stories**

*Make up a story. Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.*

– Toni Morrison, Nobel lecture

*In the beginning / Once upon a time*: We recognize these phrases from fairy tales and fables we knew as children. We recall that the first verse of the Hebrew Scriptures proclaims “In the beginning, God created heaven and earth”; and that the opening of the Gospel of John declares: “In the beginning was the Word.”

Why? This course asks questions—and discovers new ones—about why we tell stories, why we need stories, why we want to see ourselves in stories. Why are stories the first things we learn? Why do we like imagining ourselves in them? Why is there no community on the globe that lacks stories? What would a world without stories be?

And yet storytelling has always had an “an alarming relationship to lying,” as the Victorian social critic Thomas Carlyle proclaimed about the novel. Americans in colonial New England also thought novels were sinful and discouraged children from reading them. Why?

We will probe this double paradox—our need to tell stories, to discover meaning, even our meaning, in stories—and our skepticism that stories are not quite the way towards truth, or that their means of truth-telling undermines the story’s factual accuracy (“truth”?).

Examples abound. Take these two protest novels from the 1800s:

Harriet Beecher Stowe chose the novel as the most effective genre for protesting slavery in America. Abraham Lincoln reportedly told her that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* started the Civil War. This novel suggests that story-telling can be world-changing. Yet, for 20th Century readers its racial stereotypes are damnable and its message deeply segregationist.

Or: Charles Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist* as a “parish boy’s progress” through the horrors of London. And yet this wildly popular protest novel contains one of the most famous anti-Semitic stereotypes ever produced—all used to protest the nature of industrial England.

Or consider this example: Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel *Fun Home* is a memoir about her life, but that life is constantly being crowded towards the page’s margins by stories told and lived by parents and siblings. All need their stories. All seek a happy ending for their stories. Yet all find reality interrupting the stories they are telling.

In this course we will read fairy tales, children’s books, a memoir, novels and short stories. We will watch commercials; one writer of ad copy has discussed “[Why good storytelling helps you design great products](http://gigaom.com/2013/04/14/why-good-storytelling-helps-you-design-great-products/).” We will consider television serials that work as Dickens’ serial fiction did: to engage readers/viewers over a long period of living *in the text*, visual or verbal. Throughout we will be considering the uses to which story-telling is put, all to satisfy what one writer calls our “insatiable craving for narrative.”

We will focus on these questions—and on new questions that students will add throughout the term:

Why do we begin with stories?

What marks the difference between “history” and story-telling?

Why are we compelled to tell stories? And why did our parents tell us

“Don’t tell stories”? Are we lying when we tell stories?

Why do we want to see ourselves in stories—written and visual?

How do stories end? What endings do they try to avoid?  How do we know?

In this course we will read narratives spanning millennia—from Genesis and Homer to *Charlotte’s Web*,from Dickens to Alison Bechdel and Edgar Allen Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes*. Our purpose: to ask questions about *why* we need stories and to think about *how* we tell what we tell.

**English 01:350:200: *Once Upon a Time* fulfills the ARTS AND HUMANITIES (AHp) Learning outcome**

**Organization of the course**

**Part 1: *In the beginning*: Our Story in/as History, Our Story: Homeward Bound**

Here we consider how stories begin—how writers choose a beginning. We will look at the three “origin” stories in Genesis: the creation of the world the events in the Garden of Eden, and the first stories of Abraham, Sarah, and their sons Jacob and Esau. Then we will consider Homer’s *Odyssey*, a narrative as obsessed with home as Abraham’s descendants are with getting to Jerusalem.

Then we will look at E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*. What do we learn from a children’s story? Indeed how do we know this is a children’s story? And we will ask students to consider their reading of *Harry Potter* and the *Hobbit* tales. Where does “once upon a time” actually begin? What ending is already there in the beginning?

We will think about the detective story, something always focused on an end—on finding the murderer, or the stolen jewel. We will ask how this kind of story challenges the definitions of story we have been developing. How does it use the conventions of story-telling? And what new elements does it introduce? What ending is necessary for detectives?

**Part 2: Stories as Social Documents: Intervening in the “Real World”**

We will ask how two novelists—Harriet Beecher Stowe and Charles Dickens—determined to use story-telling as a way to intervene in the “real” world: How do they begin their stories? How do they find an ending? What are the costs of arriving there? Who has the right to tell a story? How does the narrator of a story “fit” into the world of the story’s characters and their world?

**Part 3: Memoir/Memorial: or, My Story/Their Story/Our Story**

In the course’s concluding section, we’ll begin with Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, connecting it to other homeward bound stories that we have considered throughout the term. We will return to the issue of how these stories define home, and consider why *home* is so central to the work of story-telling and why a return home helps to form a story’s ending. Because this is a memoir in the form of a graphic narrative, we will consider the relationship between image and words: how do they work together? Are there tensions between them?

Then we will look at various memorials created in the 20th and 21st centuries: the Viet Nam Veterans Memorial, the 9/11 Memorial, the Holocaust memorials, and other memorials that students choose (perhaps investigations of cemeteries or family scrapbooks). What are memorials? What does the shaping of a memorial tell us about the stories and “real” people being remembered?

**Requirements for the course:**

* Bi-weekly one-page exercises focused on some aspect of the story being discussed (25%)
* Two 5-page essays (50%)
* Mid-term and Final examination (25%)

**Texts for the course**:

The Hebrew Scriptures: *Genesis*

Homer, *The Odyssey*

E. B. White, *Charlotte’s Web*

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin: or, Life Among the Lowly*

Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* or *A Christmas Carol*

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*

Edgar Allan Poe, “Murders in the Rue Morgue”

Arthur Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes:* “The Adventure of the Speckled Band”

**Assessment**

This course fulfills the Arts and Humanities (AHp) SAS Learning. Fulfillment of the AHp learning goals will be determined through evaluation of the two essays, asking if the writer has demonstrated an understanding of the text’s role in defining the nature of story-telling and of the ways story-telling works through language—of the importance of *how* we tell what we tell.

The AH rubric:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Evaluations: | **A** | **B** | **C** | **D-F** |
| Structure of the essay | There is a complex interpretive and analytical argument evident throughout. | Introductory paragraph with a clearly stated thesis.  Thesis developed progressively and logically in the body of the paper.  Concluding paragraph that summarizes the argument. | Goals achieved inconsistently. | Goals achieved occasionally. |
| Textual analysis | There is a seamless relationship between the argument and the analysis of the literary text. | Able to analyze the texts according to the characteristics of their genre, or any other literary aspects, using the appropriate critical vocabulary, and quoting examples. | Goals achieved inconsistently. | Goals achieved occasionally. |
| Historical-cultural context | Masterful application of tools of cultural and literary analysis with awareness of cultural specificity. | Argument is significantly inflected by an awareness of the significance of a particular historical or cultural background. | Demonstrates awareness of the significance of a particular historical or cultural background. | No reference to any historical or cultural background. |
| Interpretation | An original interpretation. New idea logically supported by the analysis, comparison and contextualization of the texts under study. | The interpretation goes beyond what was discussed in class. | The interpretation mostly resembles what was discussed or covered in class. | No discernable or coherent interpretation. |
| TOTAL |  |  |  |  |