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Reading the World: Comparative Literature in a Global Context

LIT 3337.001 - Comparisons (3 semester credit hours) Examination of the relationship between at least two fields, disciplines, national literatures, themes, literary and aesthetic movements, or historical periods. Prerequisites: (LIT 2350 and 6 semester credit hours from the following: LIT 2320 or LIT 2321 or LIT 2322 or LIT 2331) or equivalent or instructor consent required. (3-0) S

Course Description

This course invites students to engage critically with literature in the context of today's complex, interconnected world. Beginning with the intentional selection of texts, students will develop strategies for reading both broadly and deeply—balancing the precision of close reading with the agility of rapid, comprehensive engagement. Readings will span multiple genres, with particular emphasis on literary fiction translated into English from languages around the world. Through the study of translation as both an art and a cultural bridge, students will examine how works from diverse linguistic traditions expand our understanding of global perspectives while enriching the English language and its literary traditions. By the end of the course, students will have cultivated an open-minded approach to literature and society, equipped to navigate and interpret the written word across cultures, genres, and contexts.

Course Objectives

- Develop strategies for close reading and rapid, comprehensive reading
- Engage critically with literature from diverse global contexts
- Analyze the role of translation in shaping literary meaning
- Reflect on how reading globally informs understanding of contemporary society

Grading Policy

- 30% Participation & Attendance
- 30% Reading Responses
- 40% Final Project

Required Books

- **David Damrosch** – *How to Read World Literature* (Wiley-Blackstone) – ebook available free via UTD Libraries
- **Juan Rulfo** – *Pedro Páramo*, translated by Douglas Weatherford (Grove/Atlantic)
- **Fiston Mwanza Mujila** – *Tram 83*, translated by Roland Glasser (Deep Vellum)
- **Italo Calvino** – *Invisible Cities*, translated by William Weaver (Vintage)
- **Anne Garréta** – *Sphinx*, translated by Emma Ramadan (Deep Vellum)

- **Banu Mushtaq** – *Heart Lamp* (And Other Stories)
- **Alexis Wright** – *Praiseworthy* (New Directions)
- **Mikhail Bulgakov** – *Master and Margarita* (I recommend the Burgin & O’Connor translation)
- **Han Kang** – *The Vegetarian* (translated by Deborah Smith)

Excerpted Readings From

- **Alberto Manguel** – *A History of Reading* (Penguin Books)
- **Alberto Manguel** – *A Reader on Reading* (Yale University Press)
- **Alexander Beecroft** – *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Verso)
- **Azar Nafisi** – *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (Penguin)
- **Paul Auster** – *The Invention of Solitude* (Penguin)
- **Pierre Bayard** – *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*
- **Sean Cotter, ed.** – *The Man Between: Michael Henry Heim and a Life in Translation* (Open Letter)
- **Elaine Castillo** - *How to Read Now: Essays* (Penguin)
- **Goethe** – On World Literature
- **Christopher Prendergast, ed.** - *Debating World Literature* (Verso)
- **Emily Apter** – *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (Verso)
- **Franz Kafka** – *The Metamorphosis* (Schocken)
- **Gabriel García Márquez** - *One Hundred Years Of Solitude*, translated by Gregory Rabassa (Harper)
- **Harold Bloom** – *How to Read and Why* (Scribner)
- **Italo Calvino** – “Why Read the Classics” translated by William Weaver
- **Milan Kundera** – *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* translated by Michael Henry Heim
- **Toni Morrison** – *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Vintage)
- **Jorge Luis Borges** – *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley (Penguin)
- **Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o** – *Decolonising the Mind* (Penguin)
- **Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o** – *The Language of Languages: Reflections on Translation* (Seagull)
- **Jean-Paul Sartre** – *What is Literature?* (Harvard University Press)
- **Lawrence Venuti** – *The Translator's Invisibility* (Routledge)
- **Jhumpa Lahiri** – *Translating Myself and Others* (Princeton University Press)
- **Nikolai Gogol** – *Collected Stories* translated by Richard Pevear & Laura Volokhonsky
- **Percy Bysshe Shelley** – “A Defence of Poetry”
- **Martha C. Nussbaum** – *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Harvard University Press)
- **Edward Said** – *Orientalism* (Pantheon)
- **Viktor Shklovsky** – *On the Theory of Prose* (Dalkey Archive)
- **Walter Benjamin** – *The Task of the Translator* (Harvard University Press)

Week-by-Week Syllabus

Unit I – Why Read in a Global Context? (Weeks 1–3)

Week 1 – Introduction: Choosing What to Read

- **Readings:**
 - Sunil Iyengar - "Taking a Page from Baldwin: Book-Reading as a Violence-Coping and Prevention Strategy"
 - James Baldwin – “Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare”
 - Goethe on World Literature
 - Italo Calvino – “Why Read the Classics”
 - Lincoln Michel – “The Grand Ballroom Theory of Literature”
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. August 26: Why are we here? What is comparative literature?
 2. August 28: What makes a text “worth reading” in today’s world? How do different genres shape how we approach meaning?

Week 2 – Reading the World Through Literature

- **Readings:**
 - Alberto Manguel, selections from *A History of Reading*
 - Borges – “The Library of Babel,” “Pierre Menard,” “The Garden of Forking Paths”
 - Mariana Enriquez – “Things We Lost in the Fire”
 - Pierre Bayard – “Speaking About Yourself” (from *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*)
 - David Damrosch – *How to Read World Literature* (excerpts throughout the semester)
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. September 2: How does where and when you read influence what you see in a text?
 2. September 4: How does fiction shape political or social awareness differently than nonfiction?

Week 3 – Reading as Cultural Citizenship

- **Readings:**
 - Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity* (excerpts)
 - Edward Said, “Introduction” to *Orientalism*
 - Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (Ch. 1–3)
 - David Damrosch – *How to Read World Literature* (excerpts)
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. September 9: How can literature help us “cultivate humanity”?
 2. September 11: In what ways can literature challenge harmful cultural narratives?

Unit II – How to Read: Deep and Broad Approaches (Weeks 4–6)

Week 4 – Close Reading in Practice

• **Readings:**

- Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, translated by William Weaver
- Vladimir Nabokov - Good Readers and Good Writers
- Jhumpa Lahiri, *Translating Myself and Others*

• **Discussion Questions:**

1. September 16: How does Calvino use structure and style and incorporate inspiration into his narrative?
2. September 18: How might writing in another language change an author's style?

Week 5 – Reading Broadly and Quickly

• **Readings:**

- Milan Kundera – *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*
- Sean Cotter – “The Unbearable Xness of Y” (from *The Man Between*” Michael Henry Heim and a Life in Translation)
- Terence McKenna – “Surfing on Finnegans Wake”
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• **Discussion Questions:**

1. September 23: What changes when you read an entire novel in a short period of time?
2. September 25: What do you lose or gain by reading quickly? What's gained by “surfing” a text?

Week 6 – Comparative Reading Across Genres

• **Readings:**

- Juan Rulfo – *Pedro Páramo*
- Rulfo photography
- Carmen Boullosa – *Texas: The Great Theft*
- Gabriel García Márquez – *One Hundred Years of Solitude*
- Sergio Pitol – *The Art of Flight* OR “Bukhara Nocturne”

• **Discussion Questions:**

1. September 30: How do visual and verbal narratives interact?
2. October 2: Does the visual context change how you read the text?

Unit III – Reading in Translation (Weeks 7–10)

Week 7 – What Is Translation?

• **Readings:**

- Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator*
- Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (selected chapters)
- Percy Bysshe Shelley – “A Defence of Poetry”
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. October 7: Is translation an act of creativity or fidelity?
 2. October 9: Should a translation feel “foreign” or “natural”?

Week 8 – Translation and Culture

- **Readings:**
 - Gayatri Spivak, *The Politics of Translation*
 - Percy Bysshe Shelley - "A Defence of Poetry"
 - Viktor Shklovsky – “Art as Device” (from *On the Theory of Prose*)
 - Paul Auster – *The Invention of Solitude* (excerpts)
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. October 14: How can translation reinforce or challenge colonial power?
 2. October 16: What cultural elements risk being “untranslatable”?

Week 9 – Translation and Style

- **Readings:**
 - Anne Garréta - *Sphinx*
 - Harry Mathews – “Translation and the Oulipo: The Case of the Persevering Maltese”
 - Oulipo excerpts and examples
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. October 21: How does Garréta’s and her fellow Oulipians’ style survive (or change) in translation?
 2. October 23: What role does grammar, punctuation, gender, word choice—or its absences—play in meaning?

Week 10 – Fragment and Voice Across Languages

- **Readings:**
 - Alexis Wright – “The Inward Migration in Apocalyptic Times”
 - Alexis Wright – *Praiseworthy* (excerpts)
 - Banu Mushtaq – *Heart Lamp*
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. October 28: What does fragmentation reveal about voice and identity in Wright’s and Mushtaq’s works?
 2. October 30: How do translation choices or English original texts affect our understanding of character development? ?

Unit IV – Reading the World (Weeks 11–14)

Week 11 – Literature as Witness: The Ethics of Representation

- **Readings:**
 - Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*
 - Interview with Han Kang & Deborah Smith
 - Elaine Castillo – “How to Read Now”
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. November 4: What ethical challenges arise when writing about trauma?
 2. November 6: How does translation complicate ethical choices in literature?

Week 12 – Short Global Encounters

- **Readings:**
 - Nikolai Gogol – “The Nose” and “The Overcoat”
 - Franz Kafka – “The Metamorphosis”
 - Stories from *Asymptote* and *Words Without Borders*
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. November 11: How does the brevity of short fiction amplify its emotional impact?
 2. November 13: What challenges are posed by translating memoir versus fiction?

Week 13 – Political and Historical Memory

- **Readings:**
 - Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita* (full book, and comparing translations)
 - Articles on Russian/Soviet literature, politics, and history
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. November 18: How does the novel mix personal memory with national history?
 2. November 20: Does magical realism dilute or enhance political critique?

Week 14 – Voices from the Global South

- **Readings:**
 - Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o – *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*
 - Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o - *The Language of Languages: Reflections on Translation*
 - Fiston Mwanza Mujila, *Tram 83*
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. November 25: What does *Decolonising the Mind* mean for global readers into the 21st century, and how does it compare to his updated essays in *Language of Languages*?
 2. November 27: How does *Tram 83* critique modernity?

Unit V – Final Reflections & Moving Forward (Weeks 15–16)

Week 15 – Final Reflections

- **Readings:**
 - Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (selections)
 - Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*
 - Emily Apter – *Against World Literature*
 - Christopher Prendergast, ed. - *Debating World Literature*
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. December 2: How has your approach to reading changed?
 2. December 4: How can literature address global crises?

Week 16 – Final Presentations & Closing

- **Readings:**
 - Final projects
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. December 9: What works should you read next to expand your global literary vision? Where do we go from here as readers, as a society?

Final Exam/Paper

- **Due by December 12:** Submit a research paper analyzing a topic from the semester, comparing different texts, applying critical perspectives to a global text or theme. Please propose your topic to me no later than October 30 so that you have time to prepare properly.