

ENLIGHTENMENT LITERATURE

Course Description

Enlightenment Literature covers the literature of that time period in the Western World. Students will analyze primary texts covering the genres of poetry, drama, fiction and non-fiction, and will discuss them from different critical stances. They will demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the works by responding to questions focusing on the works, movements, authors, themes, and motifs. In addition, they will discuss the historical, social, cultural, or biographical contexts of the works' production. This course is intended for students who already possess a bachelor's and, ideally, a master's degree, and who would like to develop interdisciplinary perspectives that integrate with their prior knowledge and experience.

About the Professor

Dr. Susan Smith Nash has developed numerous literature courses in the humanities, including world literature, American literature, and film. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Oklahoma, and is widely published in the areas of literature, e-learning, and discourse. In addition, she has served as editor for journals focusing on literature and literary criticism.

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Unit 1

Satire exemplifies the Enlightenment desire critique and improve individuals and society. What are some of the subjects that the play, Tartuffe, satirizes? Describe the characters that help build the satire. What are some of the dangerous areas? How might Moliere have gotten in trouble with the authorities, such as the church and the government?

Unit 2

Discuss the use of fiction during the Enlightenment to criticize various social institutions. Discuss the role of the journey, or encounters between contrasting societies to further level criticism of institutions and/or human nature. What do the authors gain when they satirize attempts to put together ideal societies?

Unit 3

-How do the ideas in "An Essay on Man" help to explain the basis of satiric criticism in "The Rape of the Lock"? In "The Rape of the Lock," how are epic conventions used to make the characters and the action ridiculous? How are certain elements deflated and others inflated to make it both comic and satiric? How does The Rape of the Lock satirize the life of the elite?

Unit 4

The Enlightenment held that the improvement of society was possible. Discuss Equiano's criticism of the institution of slavery and how it ties in with the belief that society can be improved by eliminating certain institutions. In contrast, Franklin believed that improvement of society would occur at the level of the individual. Compare and contrast the mechanisms by which they believed society could be perfected.

Unit 5

Enlightenment authors critiqued the absolute power and divine right of rulers, and suggested that the actual power of governance rests with the people rather than the rulers. Further, the Enlightenment pointed out that traditional social and family arrangements gave unequal rights to women. How did the Enlightenment aim to establish of all people. Please use the readings in this unit as the foundation of your answer, and support your argument with clear examples.

Final Essay

Discuss the materials from the first half of the course as serving to question or destroy traditional social arrangements. How do they prepare the way for positive declarations of rights of the individual? Who ought to have rights? Should some be denied rights? What do the authors say?

Discuss the ways, direct or indirect, positive or negative, in which Enlightenment authors explore and enforce social norms. Are there general areas of agreement about the ways in which individuals as well as societies should function? Are there inalienable truths? What are the standards of judgment? How do various authors establish and enforce them? Are the sanctions—that is, punishments for transgression—theological or social/secular? How far do the authors expand idea of individual rights and responsibilities?

Enlightenment authors differed in their views of human nature. Some believed that humans are / were innately evil, while others believed in the goodness and perfectibility of the human being. Discuss works of Enlightenment literature that illustrate contrasting views of human nature.

In this course we have read work written over a considerable period of time, from Moliere's *Tartuffe*, in the early 17th century, to the work of Thomas Jefferson, who lived until two centuries after Moliere's *Tartuffe*. We have grouped all of these thinkers as Enlightenment minds, but of course that kind of large label is bound to miss the important details underneath it. Do you see significant differences in viewpoint/world-view among our Enlightenment authors, according to the time position they occupy in our readings?

The defense of basic human rights is a powerful theme in Enlightenment writing. What are the main texts in the development of that theme? Do these issues, of individual rights, seem to you prominent in earlier works we have read? In Greek tragedy? In Chaucer or Boccaccio?

Moliere

Introduction

Drama as Social Criticism. 'Enlightenment' is a term commonly applied, in the West, to a cultural and social movement toward rationalism, democratic perspectives, scientific development; broadly speaking to developments unfolding during the 18th century. Our first two texts, however, date from the 17th century, and *Tartuffe*, in particular, from a world which in some ways replays perspectives of the classical world of drama and satire. Moliere addresses himself to the new social world—middle or upper class—which was flourishing under the favorable economic climate of King Louis XIV.

Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 4. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*Tartuffe*

Questions

General- Like other satirists before him—was Petronius one?—Moliere pillories characters who embody a generic flaw—in this play the hypocrite—and whose inherent weakness renders them socially dysfunctional laughing stocks. What kind of social climate seems to you propitious for the raw materials of satire? Is satire a living literary form today? Where do you encounter it, and what function does it seem to you to play in society?

Theme: Human Nature- *Tartuffe* is a hypocrite and a con man. How does Moliere use his character / behavior to criticize the church, clergy, and laity? How does *Tartuffe* explore the nature of human relations, appearance vs. reality, and human weakness? If you were to rewrite *Tartuffe* so that it takes place in today's society, what and who would it include? What is the function of the other characters and how do they illustrate these points, comparing and contrasting with *Tartuffe*. Also, something about the structure of the play—how is the dramatic action organized to help Moliere make the thematic points?

Aphra Behn

Introduction

The Exotic Meets the Quest for Human Equity. You will have noted the growing presence of 'fiction' in our reading, and you should ask yourself two questions about that development: what is fictional, in the sense you are accustomed to, about the work of Chaucer, Boccaccio, or Marguerite de Navarre?

Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 4. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

Questions

General- What place does Oronooko play in this growing tradition, and does it seem more like 'contemporary fiction' than did its predecessors? In actuality historians of literature like to call Aphra Behn's fictions early forms of the modern novel; does that sound right to you? Does Oronooko, the Surinam slave/king, seem to you to be a realized fictional character? Does the story formed around this character seem to you to summon up a plausible social world, like that socially dense scene we tend to associate with some later fiction? It might also be worth asking whether this fiction of Aphra Behn is closer to 'travel writing' than to 'imaginative fiction.' Did the mediaeval travel writing we read share some of the color and fascinations Behn puts into her fictional work?

Theme: Encounter- How does Behn use the characters to establish cultural difference and to show how they are connected to the themes of the noble savage and romantic love.

Jonathan Swift

Introduction

The Human Condition: Between Banality and Viciousness. Perhaps you will see the inherent mystery in Swift's Gulliver's Travels. The author appears to be creating, in the Houyhnhnms, an attractive model for humanity at its best—until we realize that life among these people is a placid bore. The Yahoos appear malignantly disgusting, yet full of the very life missing among the Houyhnhnms. Swift as author seems to take a bitter view of mankind, yet plainly he is relying on traditional senses of value when he critiques the Lilliputians and the Brobdingnagians. We may finally want to say of this work, which fascinates us on so many levels, not least on the childish level, that it betrays our efforts to pigeonhole it as a genre.

Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 4. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*Gulliver's Travels*

Questions

General- Once again the questions. Is Gulliver's Travels fiction in the sense you usually understand? If not, what is this text? Satire on Mankind? Fantasy travel literature? Do you see here some traces of the fascination with exotic lands, which is highlighted in Oronoko? A lot of questions, yes, and none susceptible to a black and white response.

Theme: Satire- How does Swift use Gulliver's Travels to satirize English society? Where does Gulliver encounter the Yahoos and the Houyhnhnms? Why does he not see the Yahoos has human physical form at first? When does he start to see that they are, in fact, also humans, like Gulliver himself? How do the Houyhnhms behave?

Voltaire

Introduction

Innocence at Grips with the Problem of Evil. Voltaire's *Candide*, in any case, spoke straight from its time, in pillorying naïve faith in the universe, ignorance (Candide's) which leads to massive denial, and mankind's reluctance to use good sense in evaluating and in interpreting human affairs. To proclaim that all is for the best in the best possible world, when disaster is everywhere, seemed to Voltaire the height of insanity. Do you agree with him? In the face of natural disaster do you feel that faith in the order and plan of the universe is undermined? What do you think Sophocles or Virgil would have said to this proposition? After all they too dealt with, and interpreted, crushing tragedy.

Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 4. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*Candide*

Questions

General- Have you begun to note the Enlightenment penchant for correcting/critiquing human behavior, in the light of reason? Would it be correct to say that Moliere, Behn, Swift, and Voltaire all work around a reformative view of human nature? If you accept this broad general idea, which would follow from the thought of a century given to clarifying life, would you then agree that this reforming penchant was less apparent in the earlier texts we have read?

Ideas: Satire- How does Voltaire use Candide to satirize French society? Discuss the functions of Pangloss, Cacambo, and Martin. Compare Swift and Voltaire's ideal societies (the world of the Houyhnhnms vs El Dorado). Voltaire's views on the philosophy of Optimism (Leibniz). Contrast the optimism of Pangloss and the pessimism of Martin. Discuss echoes of courtly love in Candide's pursuit of Cunegonde. What does Candide believe at the beginning and end of the story? How is he criticizing utopianism?

Alexander Pope

Introduction

High Society, Elegant Language, Miniature Violence. Would you agree that comedy, and its nephew satire, operate on the assumption of authorial superiority? Were not Petronius, Cervantes, and Moliere, to pick examples from our course, all in a sense 'looking down' on mankind (or segments of mankind) as they drew their social portraits? (If so, how does comedy differ from tragedy in the relation of its author to his/her 'material'?)

Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 4. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*Rape of the Lock*

Questions

Idea: Satire- Alexander Pope is a master of satire, which he generates searing hot from his faultlessly clever Alexandrine lines. But exactly what kind of 'looking down' takes place in *The Rape of the Lock*? Is the focus on human social pretension? Is it on the pathos of woman, who is here in a wider sense victim of social rape? Would Voltaire have been comfortable with Pope's brand of satire? What do you think of the particular relation of satire to comedy in general? Is satire intended to amuse or to instruct?

Idea: Cosmology - Discuss Pope's ideas in "An Essay on Man." What is God's vision in creation? Describe "the Great Chain of Being." What are the hierarchies and the basic organization of the cosmos? How well do Pope's ideas accord with those of Voltaire's Pangloss?

Rousseau

Introduction

Holding the Onrushing Dynamic of a Life in Language. If you are hesitant to call Rousseau an Enlightenment thinker, and adopt the above reasons for hesitancy, can you not still insist on Rousseau's 'Enlightenment' desire for human liberation from prejudice and dead traditions? Finally, as an overarching question, what seems to you the relation between Rousseau's and Augustine's Confessions? Does Rousseau turn to any kind of God (or superior power) in his effort to understand and develop himself? Or he is only concerned with himself as the source of his strength, weakness, and salvation?

Readings

-Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 4. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.

Questions

General-The Enlightenment texts we have read have, on the whole, celebrated good sense, reason, and order. Do these traits apply to the work of Rousseau, in his Confessions? I expect that you will hesitate to say 'yes,' but perhaps you will still insist on the 'Enlightenment' tenor of Rousseau's thought. What will your hesitance derive from? Is Rousseau a defender of 'reason' or of 'passion'? Is he on the whole trying to free man inwardly from restricting controls? And is he not trying to achieve this liberation by displaying the evolution of his own liberation as a self-freeing creature?

Idea: Confessions- Where is Rousseau aware of transgressing the norms of society, and how does he justify it? Is there any progression in Rousseau's understanding of himself and the world? What is the point of discussing this? What kind of human being or society does he envision as ideal?

Benjamin Franklin

Introduction

Reason and the Order of Everyday Life. The text before us here is an autobiography. Is it the first autobiography we have read? Is an autobiography different from a book of 'confessions,' such as we have seen in Augustine and Rousseau? Questions like these surge upon the reading of Benjamin Franklin, a 'modern voice.' (In discussing Montaigne we mentioned the advent of the first modern tones, and felt that for the first time in our reading we got into the mind of someone whose tone was intimate to us—whether or not we agreed with his ideas.

Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 4. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*Autobiography*

Questions

General- But isn't Franklin something else again? Doesn't he seem to exist in a value world we recognize deep inside? Or am I simply revealing the little corner of prejudice that life has brought me up in?) You will note that Franklin, like Rousseau, is immensely self-centered, and glad to appear in the best light—except for carefully staged accounts of his misbehaviors. He is practical, inventive to the max, curious about everything. Do his work and his thought seem to you literary? Does he carry out his work with imagination?

Theme: Growth- As an Enlightenment thinker, Benjamin Franklin found resonance in the idea of a self-made man. What does he consider to be the ideal attributes of a human being? How does he suggest in order to improve oneself and to attain those attributes?

Equiano

Introduction

Travel, Enslaved Humiliation, and Endurance. With this 'interesting narrative' we are drawn back to Aphra Behn's *Oronooko*, and to that strain of adventure/travel/exoticism which has been a part of our reading through mediaeval travel writers and Montaigne (whose essays include frequent commentaries on the new worlds being discovered in his time). Now these travel themes blend with the grave theme of slavery and the dignity of mankind, issues which were to become keenly aired during the Enlightenment. (You can easily imagine how unsympathetic such as Voltaire, Franklin, or Aphra Behn were, to the barbarous slave-ownership practices of their day.)

Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 4. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*Autobiography*

Questions

General- In addition to these themes, which Equiano treats with intelligence and suffering, there is the conversion theme, for Equiano, like Augustine, found in the discovery of God the grounds for his own survival. Do you find Equiano a simple man who does the best in a hard life, or a creative and imaginative writer, who is artfully shaping his own story?

Experience: Slavery- Equiano is an early example of a slave narrative that critiques society. What does he say about the slave ship and the conditions? How does Equiano reflect Enlightenment values?

Mary Rowlandson

Introduction

Keeping a Cool Head in Indian Captivity. -With this text we withdraw in time almost to the date of *Tartuffe*. Imagine the cultural distance between Louis 14th's court, in which Moliere worked and which he satirized, and the Massachusetts wilderness (for such it then was, heavily wooded, swampy, and perilously cold in winter) into which a wellbred housewife was snatched, hostage to an Indian tribe whose language and culture she can not have known.

Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 4. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

Questions

General- After the dreadful loss of her baby, does Mary Rowlandson begin to take an interest in the strange new culture into which she has been thrust? Does she write with literary verve? Do Mary Rowlandson and Equiano both experience the powerlessness of victimhood? Do they deal at all similarly with this kind of victimhood?

Experience: Captivity- What happens to Mary Rowlandson? How does being a captive affect her? What are her views and feelings about the people she lived with? Is there any distinction between her experience and her later judgment of it?

Thomas Jefferson

Introduction

Ground Rules for Establishing a New State. Voltaire, Rousseau, Franklin, and Mary Wollstonecraft—who follows—form, with Thomas Jefferson, a perfect Anglo-American Enlightenment portrait. Jefferson, the chief author of the American Declaration of Independence, there sums up the guiding principles of the American Revolution—as well, on the whole, as of the almost concurrent French Revolution. The belief in ‘certain unalienable Rights’ is central to this document, which shares its time’s conviction that the human being deserves the Right to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. The particular focus of this assertion, of course, is the alleged misbehavior of the British Crown, but the philosophical point springs from an entire era in which confidence in human reason, societal good sense, and universal order is strong.

Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 4. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*Declaration of Rights and Independence*

Questions

General- Do you recognize the principles Jefferson espouses, as part of contemporary democratic practice in the West? What do you think about the philosophical foundation Jefferson is taking for granted? Is it ‘self-evident that all men are created equal’? Is it self-evident that governments derive their power from the consent of the people? How would Virgil have felt about these propositions, creator as he is of a monumental tribute to the Roman Emperor?

Mary Wollstonecraft

Introduction

Early Feminism Insisting on its Rights. Mary Wollstonecraft affirms to the max the Enlightenment assumption that every human person is equal before God. It might enrich our view of 18th century enlightened woman, to compare Mary Rowlandson with Mary Wollstonecraft.

Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 4. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*Vindication of the Rights of Women*

Questions

General- Does Mary Wollstonecraft share with her later colleague in thought the belief that man misunderstands and grossly undervalues woman? Or is Mary Wollstonecraft a middle class and god-fearing woman, dignified and honorable, but not on the cutting edge of social thought? How would Mary Wollstonecraft have read some of the other women whose voices we have heard? Sappho? Louise Labe? Margery Kempe? Do you see anything like a common thread running through the thought and feeling of these very different women? Do you think Mary Wollstonecraft would be inspiring to present day Feminists?

Theme: Women's Rights - Discuss key ideas about women's rights, marriage, and education during the Enlightenment. Do you see any relation to today's feminist movements?