

**Freshman Seminar 39k:  
Literature Humanities: The Foundation Texts of the West.**

Harvard College, Fall Term 2006, Tu Th, 3-5, CGIS-Knafel N-108.

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**Course Description:**

Our ancestors have warned us: The unexamined life is not worth living. Man is enjoined to know himself. He must learn and experience as much as he can, lest he find at the close of his days that he has not lived. A man who cannot render an account of the last three millennia is a sleepwalker. An introduction to the great books of our civilization helps the student to fulfill these injunctions, and, indeed, to understand why they are true in the first place. At this time of war, when the worst are full of passionate intensity, young Americans ought to know the tradition we are defending.

College students, from Harvard's early days down to the late nineteenth century, studied set texts in Latin, Greek, and, sometimes, Hebrew; and concentrated on the mastery of these difficult ancient languages more often than on the broader meaning of the books themselves. As our country grew more populous and university training became less elite, this approach to learning came to seem increasingly obsolete. Students preparing for a career in business or science did not hope for a gentleman's lifetime of leisure to read in depth all the texts they had but sampled in college. Great educators like John Erskine argued that the *content* of a book in a Classical tongue should justify its study in translation. And if it did not, the student was entitled to ask of it, "So what?"

After the first of the great World Wars of the twentieth century, and into the years of the Great Depression, Columbia College and the University of Chicago developed Core programs in political and humanistic literature. The intention of these courses, beyond providing a general education to enrich specialized study in one's field of concentration, was to give the student some bearings in a complex and frightening world. The word "orientation", literally finding the East, the place where the sun rises to illuminate the world, allows a sense of the spiritual aspect of such an enterprise. The Harvard Core eschews the great books and its ostensible focus on method rather than content means that instead of reading widely and intensively, the student is invited to expound a lot upon a little. This procedure, which can mask intellectual laziness, is sometimes dignified by the cognomen of close reading. (Close reading, in its proper sense, is for philologists who know their stuff, not undergraduates just striking out on the long road.) Reform of the Core is proceeding with deliberate speed and may bear fruit in the course of the millennium.

But in the interim one offers as a Freshman Seminar a modification of the justly famous Literature Humanities course of the Columbia College Core, which one taught there for twelve years. This seminar is extremely demanding. It is a kind of humanistic equivalent of Marine basic training. It engages epics, plays, and historical and philosophical works of Greece and Rome, and the central scriptures of Vedic Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity, and an epic and novel of Imperial Rome. The Seminar offered in the spring term deals with St. Augustine, Dante, Montaigne, Shakespeare, and German, Russian, English, and American novels. It can be taken separately or, preferably, as a continuation of the fall course.

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**Requirements:** Reading and participation in class discussion, three five-page essays, and regular attendance. All books on the reading list can be purchased at the Harvard Coop.

## Syllabus and Calendar:

[Tu 19 Sep, Th 21 Sep: no class meeting]

Tu 26 Sep, Th 28 Sep, Tu 3 Oct, Tu 5 Oct: R. Lattimore, tr., Homer, *The Iliad, The Odyssey*. (Handouts: Pindar, Cavafy, Mandelstam, J.R. Russell "Polyphemos Armenios".)

Tu 10 Oct, Th 12 Oct: R. Lattimore, tr., Aeschylus, *The Oresteia Trilogy (Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, The Eumenides)*.

Tu 17 Oct, Th 19 Oct: R. Lattimore, tr., Sophocles, *Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone*.

Tu 24 Oct, Th 26 Oct: R. Lattimore, tr., Euripides, *Alcestis, The Medea, Hippolytus, The Bacchae*. FIRST ESSAY DUE.

Tu 31 Oct, Th 2 Nov: Plato, *The Republic, The Symposium*; Aristophanes, *The Frogs*.

Tu 7 Nov, Th 9 Nov: R.C. Zaehner, tr., *The Bhagavad Gita*; Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*.

Tu 14 Nov, Th 16 Nov: Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics, The Poetics*.

Tu 21 Nov [Th 23 Nov: Thanksgiving holiday, no class]: Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania*. SECOND ESSAY DUE.

Tu 28 Nov, Th 30 Nov: The Holy Scriptures: Hebrew Bible: *Genesis, Exodus, Psalms*.

Tu 5 Dec, Th 7 Dec: The Holy Scriptures: New Testament: *Matthew, Romans, I Corinthians*.

Tu 12 Dec, Th 14 Dec: Virgil, *The Aeneid*.

Tu 19 Dec: THIRD ESSAY DUE.