**Literature and the World**

FC-701-2

Spring 2023

Course Timings: Wednesdays and Fridays 11.50-1:20pm

Course Location:

Instructor: Amrita Narayanan

Email: [amrita.narayanan@ashoka.edu.in](mailto:amrita.narayanan@ashoka.edu.in)

Office Hours: Wednesdays and Fridays, 1-245pm

Office Location: AC04 – 513

Teaching Fellows

**Oishiki Ganguly: oishiki.ganguly@alumni.ashoka.edu.in**

**Adit Shankar: adit.shankar@alumni.ashoka.edu.in**

**Course Description: The Self and the World**

We all narrate ourselves to ourselves, it is a process that helps us make our way about the world coherently. We acquire a self via experiences, to which we add language to form a self-narrative. What we call our ‘self’ is a composite of memory, imagination, and experience. And, no matter how much we try to describe ourselves and our experience, the process of self-storying remains inadequate to our inner experience and desire.

Literature affords us more language for our self-experience. One of the premises of this class is that our own biography, realistically put, is confining. Literature allows us more wide-ranging lives and selves beyond the possibilities of our own self-narratives. As we read about how literary characters narrate and navigate themselves in the world, we’ll also gain a closer understanding of ourselves as readers, navigating the literary and the material world.

Our primary task will be to think about how literary characters undertake self-narrative. How do literary characters define themselves? When and why do they surprise themselves? How does the self-story of literary characters occur in concert with the world? How does the characters backdrop—their culture and geography condition the self? Is the self that is evoked in nature different from the self that is evoked in the city? What is conveyed by the backdrop of snow or a river, by Japan or Columbia?

Once a literary character has dreamed up a self, they have to live, love, and meet the world with themselves. This opens up a range of other questions. When does the self feel insufficient or excessive? How do experiences like desire, rage, love, and ageing affect the self? What do literary characters do when they feel oppressed by themselves?  Above all, what language is available for these inner experiences?

We will explore these themes and questions with the overarching goal of growing as readers. By the end of the course, you will not only have read some great literary works from across the world, you will also have honed your capacity to listen for psychological themes across literary works. Your mid-term and final papers are designed to help you develop from readers of the plot to producers of ideas—they’ll give you a chance to forward your own perspective on what is conjured up by and contained in the literary works we read.

**Course Objectives**

1. To become attentive to how characters in a novel discover themselves and form a self-narrative.
2. To recognize how language in great literary works offers a vehicle for self-description and self-discovery
3. To read bodies not as purely biological machines but as a theaters of self-experience.
4. To know ourselves as readers of literature—how do we love, hate and despair within the frame of a novel? Which of a novel’s characters do we identify with? What does that tell us about ourselves?
5. To read books as vehicles for ideas; to identify what kind of ideas any given novel seems to be promoting (*what kind of a dream is this?*) and the perspective it represents, as well as other perspectives it might jostle against.

**Primary Texts**

1. *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* by Lewis Carrol (Penguin Classics, 1998)

1. *Brave New World* by [Aldous Huxley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aldous_Huxley) (1932)
2. *Smell* (short story)by Sadat Hasan Manto
3. *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, 1958 (Everyman’s Library, 2010)
4. Three Short Stories by Jorge Luis Borges: *The Library of Babel, Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* and *The Circular Ruins* translated by Andrew Hurley, *in Fictions, p. 44-50* (Penguin Modern Classics, 1998)
5. *The Headstrong Historian* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (short story in *That Thing Around Your Neck*, 2009)
6. *Hardboiled by* [Banana Yoshimoto](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banana_Yoshimoto)*(novella in Hardboiled & Hard Luck, 1999)*
7. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy (Roland Wilks, trans.)
8. *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde (Penguin Classics)

**Films**

Alice Through the Looking Glass (2016). 1 Hr 53 mins

The Enemy (2013) 1 Hr 30 mins

Certified Copy (2010) 1 Hr 46 mins

Course requirements

1. **Class Discussion** **(20%):** Reading the assigned texts before class is the most important requirement of this course. Please set aside sufficient time for reading—1-2 hours before each class. You are expected to bring comments and questions to the class and discussion sections. During class, you will be called upon you to share your posts with each other or to read out your post to the class. Each class will also have a discussion built around a theme that uses the reading as “a machine with which to think.” In this process we will together understand how literature contributes to life.

Attendance for both the lectures and discussion sections is required.

You are permitted four absences *across the lectures and discussions* after which your absence will be reflected in your grade. Be sure to inform one of the TF’s via email each time you use one of your four allowable excused absences.

2. **Discussion section Participation(20%)**: Make sure you are active in conversation and in completing assignments in your discussion sections.

3. **Regular Posts on Google Classroom (10%)**: From the second class onward, you are expected to post a brief response to the reading on Google Classroom (4-6 lines). Your post could address a line, a passage, question or theme that interests you from the assigned reading. You may also pose a question about the reading. Your posts should be substantial and identify material, themes, or issues, which you would like to discuss in the class. Please make sure you have submitted the posting before we start the class discussion on the text. You should post before 12 midnight on the day previous to the class lecture. The exception to this is the class in which we watch a movie during which the post is due after class. Your posts will be graded both for timely submission and their overall quality. If you’re unsure about what a posting entails, please talk to one of the TF’s about it. The instructor or/and the teaching fellows will serve as moderators and respondents for the discussions: they will post questions to get the discussion started on each text.

In class I or one of the TA’s will call upon you to share your posts with each other or to read out your post to the class.

4. **Midterm Exercise (25%)** At mid-semester, you are expected to submit a 1200-word paper that presents an argument about any of the literary texts that we have read before the midterm. Make sure you choose a theme within the text before you begin writing, and ensure that you are not simply summarizing the text or describing a character. Regardless of the topic you choose, be sure to quote closely from the text in your paper. You will have plenty of time to discuss how to go about your paper in the discussion sections that precede the mid-term due-date which is midnight on October 6, 2023.

**5.Final paper/project (25%):**

**Option 1**: Write a final 1500-word term paper that makes a compelling argument about any two of the literary texts for this class except the one you wrote for the mid-term. You could compare a theme across two texts

**Option 2**: Create a performance piece or written work that re-imagines or makes an argument about a character, idea or theme you have encountered in the class. If you choose a performance piece you must accompany it with a 3-page paper that explains the relationship of the creative work to the concepts and readings you have encountered. For example, you could do a performance piece about the theme of colonialism and masculinity in India which you link to *Things Fall Apart*.

You will have a chance to talk about your approach to the final in your discussion groups and on the last day of class.  Your final is due by midnight on December 4, 2023. No re-writes or extensions are possible on the final.

All papers should be double-spaced, in 12-point font. The papers must use a proper citation method: MLA or Chicago style are the standard choices.

**Devices Etiquette:** Please do not use your phone or laptops in class, not even to read. You should have a printed version of the relevant text and/notes for each class.

**Academic Integrity**: Plagiarism—defined as submitting the statements, ideas or work of others as one’s own—is severely penalized at Ashoka. Students are expected to produce original work in this course. All sources used in written work (including articles and books) should be properly cited. Our TF’s will run a discussion section on citations and on what constitutes plagiarism.

**Week 1**

Wednesday August 30, Introduction to the Course, No Advance Reading but there is a 4 page in-class reading from the philosopher Camus work *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955)

Discussion: What is a life worth living? What does literature have to do with it?

Friday September 1, Through the Looking Glass Chapters I-IV

(Don’t forget the poem that prefaces the book!)

Discussion: Growing up, growing literal—does it make sense? What is the value of day-dreaming versus linear thinking?

**Week 2**

Wednesday September 6, Through the Looking Glass, Chapters V-the end

Discussion: Who is the authority and what has language to do with it?

Friday September 8: **Through the Looking Glass (2016)** 1 H 53 minutes (advance screening time will be announced by the TA’s).

Discussion: What elements of the book did the director emphasis to (re) create the story? What ideas from the story are getting promoted in the movie and how are they similar or different from those in the book?

**Week 3**

Wednesday, September 13: **Brave New World** (Part 1)

Discussion: What is the vision of mental health in Brave New World? What kind of a value system does this show? How do you think that relates to our current vision of mental health?

Friday, September 15: **Brave New World** (Part 2)

Discussion: Brave New World introduces the notion of savage and civilized—what do we think of as civilized in our current cultural moment?

**Week 4**

Wednesday, September 20: Things Fall Apart, Chapters 1-10

Discussion: How does TFA interrupt or add to the idea of savage and civilized that we began to discuss in Brave New World? How do you think colonialism and modernity promotes or interrupts these categories?

Friday, September 22: Things Fall Apart, Chapters 11-19

Discussion: What do you think is the Igbo idea of masculinity? Which characters embody this ideal? How is masculinity central to Igbo Life—is this similar or different from masculinity in Indian life?

**Week 5**

Wednesday, September 27: Things Fall Apart 20-25

Discussion: What is shame? What is shame in a post-colonial context? What is its source? Think about these questions using the characters in TFA

Friday, September 29: The Headstrong Historian (Short-story by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie)

Discussion: What is modernity? What problems does it create in relationship to tradition? How do the characters of this story resolve (or at least think about) these questions?

**Week 6**

Wednesday October 4, Hardboiled by Banana Yoshimoto

Discussion: How does the imagination help us to deal with death? Is death a situation where it might be better to be out of touch with reality? Or should we treat death literally?

Friday October 6: Mid-term paper workshop—bring your complete or half complete midterm to class! Mid-terms due at midnight.

Mid-term Break October 8-17

**Week 7**

Wednesday, October 18: **Smell** (short story by Sadat Hasan Manto)

Discussion: What does sexuality have to do with the senses and with the awakening of memory? What does smell tell us about class and sensuality/sexuality in and out of this story?

Friday October 20: **The Recognition of Sakuntala**  (7 act play by Kalidasa)

Discussion: Are rings still relevant? What confirms or denies identity in today’s world? Is it different for men than for women? How do we relate identity towards the problem of remembering and forgetting described in Sakuntala?

**Week 8**

Wednesday October 25, **Home and the World**

In class exercise: The di-glossic register

Friday October 27, **Home and the World**

Discussion: How is gender represented in **Home and the World**? Discuss the characters in terms of masculine and feminine. What larger purpose does gendering serve to the overall structure of the novel. Among other things, **Home and the World** is a novel about nationalism, and an attitude towards the outside. What kind of ideas about India and nationalism are promoted in this book? How do you feel about these in today’s political context?

Idea for your Final! Check out the film version of Home and the World (Ghare-Baire 1984, 2Hr 20) which you could compare to one of the books for your final (option 1 final).

Idea for your Final! Check out Chapter 6 “Aesthetic Arrests” in my book *Women’s Sexuality and Modern India: In a Rapture of Distress* where there is a reference to Home and the World.Use this as a creative beginning to talking about gender in Home and the World.

**Week 9**

Wednesday November 1: The Death of Ivan Ilyich by Leo Tolstoy

Discussion: How do people behave around the idea of death in this story? What are the social protocols around grief? How do we live with death daily?

Friday November 3: The Library of Babel (Short story by Jorge Luis Borges) AND

Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius (Short story by Jorge Luis Borges)

Discussion: What aspect of reality is represented by the Library of Babel? What about Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius? How can we use these short stories as vehicles with which to think about our lives?

**Week 10**

Wednesday November 8: The Circular Ruins (Short story by Jorge Luis Borges)

Discussion: The circular ruins is a take on the literary trope of the double. How are doubles useful to us as a vehicle with which to think about reality? How does Borges’ double encourage us to question reality itself?

Friday November 10: Screening: Enemy 2013, Screening, 1 H 30 minutes **Please note that for this class you do not have to do a classroom post, rather you will meet with your group to answer a series of questions that will do a “reading” of the movie.**

**Week 11**

Wednesday November 15: Group Exercises on The Enemy (No Advance Reading, Student Groups are to develop questions and lead the discussion)

Friday November 17: The Importance of Being Earnest, Act I and II

Discussion: The Importance of Being Earnest is often read as a comedy of manners, in which gives a nod to society while simultaneously mocking it. What examples can you find of this simultaneous deference and critique? What might this have to do with the attitude of earnestness?

**Week 12**

Wednesday November 22: The Importance of Being Earnest, Act III

Discussion: In a set of twists, turns and word-plays this play tells us something interesting about identity and about being earnest? What is Oscar Wilde suggesting about how to live via this play? What do you think about this method of living and its relationship to our time?

Friday November 24: Screening: Certified Copy (1 Hr 46 minutes)

**Week 13**

Wednesday Nov 29: Discussion on ‘Certified Copy’: What kind of questions of identity are explored via this film? What does this film tell us about the performance of the self? How is this similar or different from what we read in Oscar Wilde?

Workshop: Converting your idea for your final into a complete work. Please bring however much of your final you have written.

Friday December 1: The Course-in-Review

Student Performances (if you would like to entertain us in any way or sum up the course with a song, dance or skit please let us know in advance)

Final papers due December 4 at midnight