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The Literature and Cinema of Revenge: Honors 493 and English 492

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RUSTY RUSHTON

The Literature and Cinema of Revenge
Honors 493 and English 492
3 Credit Hours

RUSTY RUSHTON
UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM, UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM
MICHAEL SLOANE, DIRECTOR

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

This course explores the moral and aesthetic tenets of revenge passion as represented in Western literature and film. In addition to viewing such cinematic works as The Godfather and Dead Man Walking, we read Greek and Renaissance drama, passages from The Bible, Romantic poetry and philosophy, and essays concerned with contemporary instances of revenge. We are particularly interested in the historical shift from family- and clan-oriented societies to those based on national judicial systems, as well as in the emotional price we continue to pay in moving from the one type of satisfaction to the other.

TEXTS

Shakespeare, Hamlet
Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice
Aeschylus, The Oresteia
Euripides, Medea
Kyd, The Spanish Tragedy (or Four Revenge Tragedies, ed Katharine Maus)
Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy & The Genealogy of Morals
Freud, Civilization and its Discontents
Shelley, The Cenci
Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49

SYLLABUS

Tue Jan 7 Introduction, handouts for discussion
Thu Jan 9 personal touches: students share their suppression, their wrath (2-page personal narratives due, to be noted w/ comments by me, but not graded)
Tue Jan 14 Shakespeare, Hamlet (Acts I–III)
THE LITERATURE AND CINEMA OF REVENGE

Thu Jan 16  Hamlet (Acts IV–V)
Tue Jan 21  Vengeance & the Legal System (handouts, guest lawyer Richard Stockham)
Thu Jan 23  passages from The (Judeo-Christian) Bible (handout)
Mon Jan 27  showing of The Godfather I, 8:00 p.m. Honors House
Tue Jan 28  The Godfather I (film)
Thu Jan 30  Thomas Kyd, The Spanish Tragedy
Tue Feb 4  Aeschylus, The Oresteia (intro + Agamemnon)
Thu Feb 6  The Oresteia (The Libation Bearers & The Eumenides)
Mon Feb 10  showing of The Godfather II, 8:00 p.m. Honors House
Tue Feb 11  The Godfather II (film)
Thu Feb 13  Euripides, Medea
Tue Feb 18  Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice (Acts I–III)
Thu Feb 20  The Merchant of Venice (Acts IV–V)
Fri Feb 21  recitation in my office of Portia’s speech on mercy (IV.i.181–89) or Shylock’s on being a Jew (Ill.i. “He hath disgraced...humility? Revenge.”)
Mon Feb 24  showing of Dead Man Walking, 8:00 p.m. Honors House
Tue Feb 25  Dead Man Walking (film)
Fri Feb 28  first essay (5–7 pages) due in my office by end of day
Mar 4–Mar 13  student-groups meet w/ me in my office
Thu Mar 6  The Genealogy of Morals: Second Essay (1, 11, 12, 23)
Mon Mar 10  showing of Betrayal, 8:00 p.m. Honors House
Tue Mar 11  Harold Pinter, Betrayal (film)
Thu Mar 13  Michel Foucault, from Discipline and Punish (handout)
Fri Mar 14  revisions of first essay due in my office by end of day
Tue Mar 18  group presentations on modern political situations & issues*
Thu Mar 20  group presentations (cont’)
Fri Mar 21  second recitation of Portia’s or Shylock’s speech, my office
Tue Mar 25  Freud, Civilization and its Discontents (I–IV)
Thu Mar 27  Civilization and its Discontents (V–VIII)
Tue Apr 8  Poe, “The Cask of Amontillado” & “The Tell-Tale Heart”; Faulkner, “Barn Burning” (all handouts)
Thu Apr 10  No Class (2-page film review due in my office by end of day)
Tue Apr 15  Percy Bysshe Shelley, The Cenci
Thu Apr 17  Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49 (reading quiz)
Tue Apr 22  The Crying of Lot 49 (cont’)
Thu Apr 24  Conclusion, wrap-up, second essay (10–12 pages) due by end of day

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Thu May 1,
10:45–1:15 our final exam, here in the Honors House

*possible topics for group presentations include Rwanda, Bosnia, Israel/Palestine, South Africa, Gandhi, M. L. King, the prosecution of Nazi war criminals, the American legal system, America’s “war on terrorism.”

GRADERS

20% first essay (5–7 page)
30% second essay (10–12)
20% final exam (essay style)
10% student group-presentations
5% 2-page film review
5% the two recitations of either Portia’s or Shylock’s speech
10% class participation (can’t hurt, can help) & attendance (can’t help, can hurt)

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