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**ANCIENT MYTHS IN A MODERN WORLD:  
A MULTI-MEDIA APPROACH TO HONORS EDUCATION AND  
UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH**

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**ABSTRACT**

This Honors seminar examines a number of myths generated by diverse cultural groups (American Indian, Central and South American, African, and Asian) both in their ancient context and, wherever possible, in their actualizations in modern society. The title of the seminar should be viewed rather as a question than as a statement: Can we observe the traces of myths and/or forms of mythic thinking in the various structures, activities, and beliefs of modern societies? The scope and the diversity of cultural content makes the course appropriate as a general education course; it requires the student to think critically and analytically about the nature of mythic thinking, the role of myths in society, and the significance of mythical expressions (myths, legends, poems, tales) in the development of a self-concept as well as the concepts of cultural identity that underlie societal organization. The course does not deal with cultural areas in isolation from one another but rather emphasizes cultural diversity and the cross-cultural aspects encompassed by the universal nature of mythic thinking. A student should emerge from this course with a new respect for and understanding of the unity of mythic thinking within the diversity of cultural representation, i.e., the actual forms that myths take in cultural transmission over time.

**THE COURSE AND PROJECTS**

This course uses the study of myth and theories of myth analysis to introduce students to the broader objectives of literary and cultural analysis. The specific goals for the student are to read and write critically and analytically, to articulate opinions clearly, to become familiar with expert theories, to examine personal beliefs, and to become actively involved in the learning process. The overall course objective is to understand the nature of mythic thinking and mythic imagination by exploring the universality of mythic themes and images. All course discussions center on Joseph Campbell's *Myths to Live By*, supplemented by other texts related to the topics of "myth and modernity," "how myths function in a cultural context," and "the interaction of myth studies with science and other disciplines." These topics are explored in some depth by relating them to traditional approaches of myth analysis: *Myth and Ritual* (J. G. Frazer), *Myth and Psychology* (Jung/Freud), *Myth and Primitive Thought* (Levi-Strauss & Structuralism), *Myth and Religion* (M. Eliade).

The models of mythic narrative include texts and audio-visual resources. Beginning with a collection of Native American and Mesoamerican Creation Myths, analyzed according to one or more of the theories mentioned above, students are then asked to reflect on the mythic imaginative narrative underlying the opening "Ape sequence" from Stanley Kubrick's *film 2001--A Space Odyssey*, and the final "Big Bang" sequence from his *film 2010*. Comparisons of this type are well suited to consideration of both the medium and the message, whether text, film, or,

in the Kubrick case, the addition of music to enhance an idea. A similar approach was used to discuss myth and ritual, or the manifestation of mythic thought in social contexts. The text is an eyewitness account of a cremation ceremony in Bali (1847), included in Clifford Geertz's *Local Knowledge*. This narrative of heightened ritualized attitudes towards death leads to a viewing and discussion of the videotape of the funeral of President John F. Kennedy, followed by an analysis of a video excerpt from the opening ceremonies of the Sydney Olympic games, 2000.

The section of the course dealing with "Ways of Thinking" draws upon two types of materials: myths as text, and the mythic thinking underlying modern attitudes. The first category includes four types of myth (Creation Myths, Hero Myths, Afterlife Myths, Apocalyptic Myths), with each team responsible for a group of myths representing each type from the part of the world to which that team has been assigned (Team I: Europe, excluding Greece and Rome; Team II: Africa, North & Sub-Saharan; Team III: North, Central, and South America; Team IV: Asia & Australia). The second category is issue-oriented articles that require students to take a position regarding the argument and to assess the mythic significance of the point(s) of view. While a variety of materials are used in this way, examples of provocative articles are "Stephen Hawking, the Big Bang, and God," a web-based article about the Flat Earth Society, and "Peyote Rituals in Utah," an article from the *Salt Lake Tribune*. The creative imagination and mythic thought finds challenging expression in the poems "The Second Coming" by W.B. Yeats and "Natural Music" by Robinson Jeffers. In each case a standard literary analysis can lead to identification and analysis of mythic themes, mythic imagery, and conceptual structures developed out of myth narratives.

Given the emphasis on collaborative-cooperative learning, most class activities involve some form of teamwork, either teams of five students or, in some cases where articles are analyzed, pairs of students. In the interest of controlling the ethnic and gender diversity of the teams, students are "assigned" to teams, with the understanding that team membership can change so long as the diversity balance is not disrupted and/or an equal change is made, i.e., the size of the teams remains the same. For the discussion pairs, where articles such as "Funeral Rites of Hindus and Buddhists" and "A Role Model for Jesus" are discussed, students are encouraged to seek out a partner without regard to the team status of the partner. While the team concept formalizes the student-student interactions, and this is required as preparation for each class assignment involving an in-class oral presentation, the pairing of students leaves room for personal linkages. Since all Honors students live in the same dormitories, these arrangements are easy to maintain and facilitate significant contacts between students outside the classroom.

The class format, active and student-centered, ensures that every student is involved in the planning and presentation of materials, either as a team participant in the discussion and development of assignments, as a team-designated spokesperson, or as an individual presenter on a team presentation. While class assignments are determined in advance and presented in the syllabus, the teams develop the structure of the class for most assignments, each chapter of the Campbell text being divided between two teams. Students are responsible for identifying major themes, developing collateral questions (and potential answers), and providing transparencies and handouts for the class presentation of materials. No student is able to make it through this class without some form of active participation. Students are graded accordingly: an individual grade and a group grade for each assignment, as appropriate. The group grade (an evaluation of the team presentation and an affirmation, based on inquiries, that each student contributed to the team effort. Functionally, the group grade can be used to raise a lower individual grade, if needed, according to a scale set up by the instructor.

The major research activity of the course is the final project, which has team and individual components. The project is a cooperative, collaborative effort that should result in a discussion/research product revealing what students learned about the forms and expressions of mythic imagination in the cultural area to which they were assigned. The primary tasks of the project are dealt with in class discussions and through group and/or independent research throughout the semester. Students are introduced to research methods and resources through a library workshop conducted by library staff; the staff also create a web page of resources relevant to the course that is actively maintained throughout the semester. The library staff conducting the workshop are also resource persons for the project, if needed. The responsibilities of the team(s) are to (a) develop a definition of "mythic imagination" based on readings and class discussion; (b) develop familiarity with at least three approaches to myth studies; (c) develop, in consultation with the instructor, the cultural criteria by which the forms or manifestations of mythic imagination are to be evaluated; and (d) search for texts that illustrate "mythic imagination" in the assigned culture region, using handouts from class, texts in the library collection, or the Internet for additional materials, using the links given in the syllabus. The body of the project is an analysis of selected texts on the basis of (1) mythic significance, (2) cultural significance, and (3) contemporary relevance. Teams are responsible for preparing class presentations for the end of the semester, using a designated spokesperson, to relate the individual textual analyses within the team to some aspect of Campbell's book. Each student is required to prepare a written product based on research, team discussions, and any essays written during the semester.

Although the course emphasizes a student-centered approach, the role of the instructor is crucial to the success of the class. Communication between faculty and student is facilitated by "course-mail," a communications vehicle provided to each instructor by the Scheduling Office, WebCT, a password-access course management tool, and the instructor's departmental web site, a centralized source for the syllabus, non-copyrighted course materials, such as self-tests, duplicating the WebCT offerings for students who prefer not to use the password access. E-Mail is a primary means of communication for questions that arise during out-of-class team discussions, for individual inquiries of a class or personal nature, and for transmitting course-relevant articles from major newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

The instructor's role includes mentoring and motivating; students need to be shown not only how the course relates to one's academic specialty and research interests but also that the broader humanistic questions being raised are important parts of one's educational philosophy. The level and intensity of student involvement relates directly to the extent to which students can see the personal value the instructor places on the success of the class as a learning experience.

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### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

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