

Name of instructor: Brian Wall

Course Title: Literature at the Borders

Institution: University of Edinburgh

Date when the materials were used: Fall Semester 2013

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PART-COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is designed for first year students studying both English and Scottish Literature. The first two years of the University of Edinburgh undergraduate curriculum are spent in a standard “Pre-Honours” curriculum. Students attend large lectures three times a week and participate in a small tutorial group once a week. While most students in the English Department select either English Literature or Scottish Literature as their primary course of study, a small number of students study both. In the first semester of the first year, English Literature and Scottish Literature share the same lectures, so the Department has created a “part-course” to round out these students’ schedules and give them the same number of credit hours as their colleagues studying other subjects.

This year’s part-course, ‘Literature at the Borders,’ will explore questions of personal and national identity in trans-border and transatlantic fiction. We will examine the idea of the literary ‘canon’ and categories of what makes literature ‘English,’ ‘Scottish,’ or ‘other’ by reading authors from inside and outside the traditional course curriculum and discussing their works in conversation with each other. We will also discuss the different types of ‘borders’ – national, cultural, and generational – present in the texts.

TEXTS FOR THE COURSE

I had two goals in selecting texts for this class. First, I wanted to supplement the reading my students would already be doing in their primary English and Scottish Literature sections with texts they might not otherwise encounter. Therefore, I carefully avoided any texts that were on the reading list for the Pre-Honours curriculum (first and second year), but tried to select texts that my students will eventually be able to situate within the periods they will discover over the course of their studies. Second, I wanted to create a space for my students to read texts in conversation with each other, so I tried to choose texts that would illustrate similarities as well as differences between authors from different backgrounds and time periods, all situated around the concept of “borders.” As this course is also somewhat supplemental to the Pre-Honours courses, I tried to stagger novels with short stories and poems so that the workload was not too overwhelming.

Novels

Walter Scott, *Rob Roy*

Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*

Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*
Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*
Helena Maria Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus*

Poems and Short Stories

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship'
Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Tell-Tale Heart,' 'The Raven,' 'The Cask of Amontillado'
Oscar Wilde, 'Lord Arthur Saville's Crime,' 'The Sphinx'
Flannery O'Connor, 'A Good Man is Hard to Find'
Philip Larkin, 'This Be the Verse'

COURSE SCHEDULE:

Week 1: Course Introduction

- This week was intended to discuss some of the different types of borders (i.e. national, geographical, linguistic, generational) that we would be exploring throughout the term.

Week 2: Conflict at the Scottish Borders – *Rob Roy*

- Areas of focus: border conflicts between Northumbria and Scotland, Jacobite rebellion, generational conflict in the Osbaldistone family, static vs. dynamic national stereotypes

Week 3: Transatlantic poetry – 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship,' 'The Raven,' 'The Sphinx'

- Areas of focus: introduction to basic poetic concepts (rhyme, meter, etc.), concept of transatlantic literary "borrowing" with Poe's use of Browning's techniques, discussion of whether borrowing is tribute or piracy

Week 4: Time travel and transatlantic satire – *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

- Areas of focus: Twain's use of England as site for satire of both antebellum United States culture and Walter Scott's historical fiction, romanticism and realism, transatlantic treatment of England through the eyes of a "Yankee"

Week 5: Comedy and horror – 'The Tell-Tale Heart,' 'The Cask of Amontillado'

- Areas of focus: reliable and unreliable narration, juxtaposition of humor and terror

Week 6: Moving the Borders conflict across the ocean – *The Master of Ballantrae*

- Not taught this term (see reflection section below)

Week 7: Comedy and horror part two – 'Lord Arthur Saville's Crime'

- Areas of focus: comparison to Poe's short stories, discussion again of transatlantic literary borrowing, social satire, comparison of Wilde's short stories to plays (students had previously read *The Importance of Being Earnest* as part of the Pre-Honours curriculum)

Week 8: Transatlantic murder most foul – *A Study in Scarlet*

- Areas of focus: Transatlantic depiction of America from an English perspective, the line between amateur and professional, difference between legal and moral justice

Week 9: Generational borders – 'This Be the Verse,' 'A Good Man is Hard to Find'

- Areas of focus: comparison between Larkin's and O'Connor's depictions of generational conflict, discussion of transatlantic commonalities

Week 10: The Mexican-U.S. border – *Under the Feet of Jesus*

- Not taught this term (see reflection section below)

REFLECTION SECTION

The major mistake that I made while planning this course was assigning *Rob Roy* and *Connecticut Yankee* to be read in the first couple of weeks of the term. My thinking was that both texts really illustrated the border conflicts and transatlantic issues that I had designed this course to exhibit. They certainly did, but in my enthusiasm I neglected the sad truth that my students were brand new at university and, while eager, were likely to be overwhelmed with this onslaught of reading for a supplemental course in addition to their already busy schedules, which they were. They made a gallant effort, but the workload was overwhelming. To compensate, I removed two of the other novels (*Master of Ballantrae* and *Under the Feet of Jesus*) and spread the rest of the reading out, which definitely made things a lot easier and greatly improved the quality of our classroom discussion. While I would have loved to look at Stevenson's spillover of English-Scottish conflict into colonial America or contrasted the contemporary UK-EU immigration with which my students were familiar with Viramontes's depiction of Mexican immigration into the United States, there simply was not enough space to cram everything in.

Despite the slightly rocky start, however, the course as a whole seemed to work rather well. My students particularly enjoyed Poe (who, like most American authors, is not typically part of the curriculum at the University of Edinburgh), and they did a great job of finding similarities and differences in his borrowing from Barrett Browning and Wilde's later borrowing from him. They also did a great job of matching up commonalities in Larkin and O'Connor – that happened on our last day of class, and I was impressed with the sophistication of their analyses of those two texts. The juxtaposition of Twain and Conan Doyle also worked well, and my students seemed to enjoy contrasting views of England and America through “foreign” eyes.

The demographics of my class also made this an interesting experience. Almost all of my students were either Scottish or English, which led to some interesting debates about the English-Scottish dynamic in *Rob Roy* given the current Scottish independence referendum. Everyone stayed civil, fortunately, and the conversation was quite productive and set a good tone for the rest of the semester. With the exception of one American student, the class was generally unfamiliar with the American authors we read. This meant I had to do a bit more introductory background than I had anticipated, but they still seemed to enjoy the American material.

If I teach this course again, I will probably either stagger *Rob Roy* over two weeks or substitute something shorter in its place. I really do think that the novel establishes the themes of the course rather nicely for my particular institution, but Scott is a pretty formidable writer, and I think my students might be less intimidated by something a bit shorter and more accessible. The best days of discussion seemed to occur after reading a few short stories or poems by authors on opposite sides of the transatlantic, so I would probably look to replace a couple more of the novels with those kinds of pairings.