

English, Maybeck High School (2009-2010)
Teacher: Michael Ditmore
Email: mjditmore@comcast.net

THE EPIC: SYLLABUS

Advanced Literature: Epics

The word “epic” connotes a literary work with huge sweep and scope, one which covers vast distances in which the hero or heroic group encounters dangerous and mysterious obstacles, monsters, demons, magicians, and gods: think *The Lord of the Rings*. Often hostile and only partially understood forces pursue or block the epic hero until at last his quest is realized. The journey is always an inner journey as well as one that covers space and time: the hero always needs to find self-understanding in order to achieve his goals, and epic literature is often seen as a way to gain self understanding and useful insight into one’s own goals and obstacles.

In this semester’s Epics course we will read three entire epics, Homer’s *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and Dante’s *Inferno*. We will also read a wide variety of samples of epics from throughout the history of literature including the *Gilgamesh*, Edmund Spenser’s *The Fairy Queen*, and Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*. While reading these great works we will study the culture and history of ancient Greece, Rome, and medieval Italy, and the early modern world. Since the epics we will read are related to each other and in a sense grow out of each other to constitute the epic tradition, a major goal of the course is for each student to arrive at a deeper understanding of how literary traditions build up and influence successive generations of authors, and how the legacy of the past is struggled with, reinterpreted, and reshaped by successive generations of writers. To know a single epic is to add hugely to your own literacy, to have read many of them is to achieve a kind of erudition that is rare among young people and which will make you stand out for the rest of your life as a literate and well-rounded person.

Course Goals

- To inform you about what many consider the most significant body of literary work in the Western canon, one which has huge influences on all other genres of literature from Chaucer to Shakespeare to James Joyce to the Coen brothers.
- To enable you to recognize a wide range of literary references when you see them, informing and deepening your understanding of almost any novel, poem, or play you may encounter.
- To strengthen your interpretive skills in numerous ways: by focusing on close reading, annotating your copies of the works themselves, and writing in the face of the readings and by comparing the various epics we will read.
- To provide you with an understanding of the components of epic literature what makes a work an epic, and how epics function in their cultural and historical settings.
- To further enhance your skills as a researcher and a scholar by conducting an analysis of contemporary views of issues engaged in one of our author’s epics, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, arguably one of the single most influential literary works ever written.

Grading Scheme

50% Course Writing: Two short essays, a comprehensive final exam, and a research paper. Their points will be averaged into a single grade of fifty or fewer points to achieve the total result (more on this later). This fifty percent is the most important part of your grade and even a slight amount of tardiness in turning in your papers can adversely affect your overall average.

30% Participation: Discussion, attitude, and readiness in class. This grade will reflect how seriously you treat the reading and how well you appear to be prepared for each day’s discussion as well as your promptness in arriving in class and contribute to discussion. Short quizzes will be folded into this grade.

20% Note-taking and record keeping: Annotation of your texts and systematic notebook entries to enhance your analysis as well as good scores in quizzes, short writing assignments, and in the work on your research paper.