



GE 13186 – Fall 2012
University Seminar:
Fictions of the Known World
Professor Tobias Boes
TR 3:30-4:45, DeBartolo Hall 349
Office hours: M 4-5, T 5-6
Decio Hall 302

In this course, we will investigate the relationship between literature and the known world in a series of texts drawn primarily from the epic tradition. “Known world,” in this context, refers to the part of the world that is (at least theoretically) available for first-hand investigation and exploration; that which can be experienced via the senses and recalled via memory.

The main goal of our class is to rethink some of the ways in which most of you have probably been taught to think about texts in high school. Consciously or not, most high school students learn to scan fictional narratives for symbols, metaphors, or allegories – for clues, in other words, that a text means something other or deeper than it would appear on first sight. For instance, *Animal Farm* is an allegory about communism, while *To Kill a Mockingbird* isn’t merely a story about a girl growing up in the South, but also a commentary on racism and intolerance in American society. These reading strategies aren’t necessarily wrong, but they steer attention away from the pleasures of the text itself to some abstract “meaning”: once we have discovered what a text is really about, we can move on.

In this course, we will instead ask how literary texts from a number of different historical periods and a variety of cultures depict the known world around them. What kind of assumptions do they take for granted about how the world works? How do they fill this world with wonder and compel us to turn pages? What would it mean to stray beyond the limits of the known world, and what does it mean to return home once you’ve taken such a journey? As we will discover, the true significance of a text can often lie on the surface. It expresses itself in the way in which we rediscover the known world – and hopefully also our own place within it.

The guiding metaphor for our class will be that of “departure and homecoming.” The first text that we will read, Homer’s *Odyssey*, illustrates both of these dynamics through the story of a man who has many adventures on foreign shores, yet finds the world to which he returns to be perhaps the strangest place of all. The next two books, Marco Polo’s account of his travels to China in the thirteenth century, and Honoré de Balzac’s short novel *Colonel Chabert*, about a veteran who comes home from the Napoleonic Wars, provide in-depth studies of departures and homecomings. The final two works, Edgar Reitz’s German TV series *Heimat* and Cormac McCarthy’s novel of the American West, *Blood Meridian*, explore how travel narratives can have a powerful impact on national identity.

Learning Goals:

Like all University Seminars, ours has two sets of intertwined learning goals. On the one hand, this course will introduce you to the basics of college-level analytical writing. To this end, you will learn how to:

- craft thesis statements that are at once appropriate, specific, and interesting
- find and organize evidence to support these statements
- create suitable introductions and conclusions for your papers
- use peer-reviewed outside resources to support your claims, and
- make use of proper editing and revising techniques to improve your essays from one draft to the next

At the same time, this course also serves as an introduction to the techniques of advanced textual analysis, and the papers that you will be writing will be *literary* in nature. This means you will learn how to:

- formulate and test objective hypotheses about works of imaginative fiction
- perform close readings to gather textual evidence
- contextualize and historicize your readings
- look for (and hopefully come to appreciate!) aesthetic complexity

An additional goal of this particular University Seminar is to turn you into confident scholars as well as vocal and active participants in critical intellectual deliberation. To achieve this goal, you will not only write critical essays, but will also:

- engage with your fellow student in an intimate seminar environment, as well as through comments posted on a public blog
- write an independently authored blog post, in which you will share your opinions about a text with the world at large, and invite critical discussion
- participate in a collaborative digital markup project on Marco Polo's *Travels*, which will then be distributed to high school teachers interested in incorporating it into their own curricula via the popular website Google Lit Trips

Grading:

Your final grade will be calculated by considering the following components:

- Regular attendance and active participation (includes contribution to blog comments) (15%)
- One independently authored blog post, approximately 500 words long (10%)
- Participation in a collaborative online project relating to Marco Polo's *Travels*, including a final evaluative narrative of about 2 pages (15%)
- One 4-5 page essay, to be submitted in both rough draft and final version (20%)

- A second 4-5 page essay evaluating a critical source, to be submitted in one version only (20%)
- Final 5-7 page essay, to be submitted in both rough draft and final version (20%)

Due dates for the papers are indicated on the class schedule. Paper grades will decrease by one step for each day that they late.

You are allowed up to two unexcused absences. After that, your *final* grade for the course will decrease by one step for each absence (i.e. from an A to an A-, etc.). Please be aware that in accordance with Notre Dame policy, a note from the Health Center doesn't necessarily excuse an absence.

Plagiarism and Academic Honesty:

The Department of German and Russian Languages and Literatures takes the University Academic Code of Honor very seriously. It is expected that all of the written work that you submit, as well as the ideas expressed therein, are your own. Over the course of the semester, we will conduct several workshops on proper research and writing procedures and we will pay special attention to issues of plagiarism and intellectual property rights. You may also find information on Notre Dame's honor code at the following web site:

<http://www.nd.edu/~hnr/code/>.

On various occasions over the course of the semester, you will engage in collaborative projects. All partners in such projects are expected to do roughly equal amounts of work. Adding your name to an assignment to which you did not substantively contribute is a form of plagiarism.

Evidence of intentional plagiarism will result in the appropriate punishment, up to and including course failure.

Notes on Audio-Visual and Electronic Materials:

This course has a supporting blog, accessible at <https://blogs.nd.edu/knownworld>. This is where you should go for news, resources, copies of handouts, changes to the syllabus and the like.

You will also need access to a copy of Google Earth, which you can download for free at www.earth.google.com. The computers in the Notre Dame computing clusters should also come with it preinstalled. I will conduct a brief tutorial on how to use this software in class, but if you are not yet familiar with its advanced functions, you may want to acquaint yourself over the first half of the semester. The program is very intuitive, and you can find training videos on the Google Earth homepage.

I will sometimes assign additional articles that you can then download from the Notre Dame electronic reserve system and print at your convenience. The address for this is <https://www.library.nd.edu/reserves/ereserves/> (you can find a hyperlink on the blog).

Finally, one of our "texts" is actually a TV mini-series, Edgar Reitz's *Heimat*. You can stream this series directly to any computer or handheld device with a reasonably fast internet connection using Notre Dame's Concourse service. A link will appear on the course blog later in the semester. If you would prefer to watch the series on a regular TV, you can do so at your leisure by going to the audio-visual center on the second floor of Hesburgh Library.

Additional Resources

You should be aware that Notre Dame has set up numerous resources that can help you succeed in your academic life in general, and in this writing-intensive Seminar in particular. A full list can be found on the course blog.

However, I would especially like to draw your attention to the University Writing Center (www.nd.edu/~writing) located in 203 Coleman Morse. Their website has a number of links that you may find interesting, and they also offer personal appointments. If you would like some help using Hesburgh Library, drop-in tutoring is available Sun-Thurs from 7-10 pm next to the First Floor Information Desk.

Schedule of Classes

8/21	Introduction to the Class	
8/23	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Books 1-2	
8/28	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Books 4-6 (we will briefly discuss Book 3 in class)	
8/30	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Books 7-8	
Sunday, 9/3	Trip to the Chicago Field Museum to see Genghis Khan exhibit	
9/4	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Books 9-11	Blog Post:
9/6	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Books 12-13	
Friday, 9/7	Rough draft of first paper due	
9/11	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Books 14-16	Blog Post:
9/13	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Books 17-18	Blog Post:
9/18	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Books 19-21	Blog Post:
9/20	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Books 22-23	Blog Post:
Friday, 9/21	Final version of first paper due	
9/25	Marco Polo, <i>The Travels</i> , Prologue + Ch. 1	Blog Post:
9/27	Marco Polo, <i>The Travels</i> , Ch. 2	
10/2	“Did Marco Polo Visit China?” – Selection of critical essays	
10/4	Introduction to research at Hesburgh with Associate Librarian Cheri Smith	
10/9	“Marco Polo, <i>The Travels</i> , Ch. 3 + Epilogue	Blog Post:
10/11	Honoré de Balzac, <i>Colonel Chabert</i>	Blog Post:
Friday, 10/12	Second paper due	
[Fall Break]		
10/23	Honoré de Balzac, <i>Colonel Chabert</i>	Blog Post:
10/25	Workshop on how to create interactive guides	

10/30	Edgar Reitz, <i>Heimat</i> , Part I	Blog Post:
11/1	Cormac McCarthy, <i>Blood Meridian</i>	Blog Post:
11/6	Reitz, <i>Heimat</i> , Part II	Blog Post:
11/8	McCarthy, <i>Blood Meridian</i>	Blog Post:
11/13	Reitz, <i>Heimat</i> , Parts III and IV	Blog Post:
11/15	McCarthy, <i>Blood Meridian</i>	
11/20	Reitz, <i>Heimat</i> , Parts V and VI	Blog Post:
	Rough drafts of final paper to be distributed to peer review groups	

[Thanksgiving Break]

11/27	McCarthy, <i>Blood Meridian</i>	Blog Post:
11/29	Reitz, <i>Heimat</i> , Part VII Peer Review Meetings	

Monday, December 3, Final version of final paper due

12/4	Reitz, <i>Heimat</i> , Part VIII	Blog Post:
12/6	Concluding discussion	
Date TBA	Final version of interactive reading guide to Marco Polo due on day of final exam	