

## **World Literature Course Content** **“Alerts, Trigger Warnings, Ratings, and Perspective”**

Tension between idealism and realism has always existed. It surfaces now in “book banning wars” waged by both “conservatives” and “liberals.” In *Canterbury Tales*, the first great literature in the English language (1400 AD), Chaucer signals a “trigger warning” when he addresses the “courtesy” (politeness) of his reader, and hopes they don’t think him “vulgar” when he repeats speeches and dialogue verbatim (word for word, as he heard it). He justifies “how vulgar it may be” as his obligation to be “true” to the “tale,” otherwise he’d be embellishing what is “unfit” and telling “untruth.” Chaucer cites Christ and Plato to justify his “realistic” approach. We cite Chaucer here, not to justify “vulgarity in classroom reading” but to observe that the “debate has always existed.” (Incidentally, we choose not to read several of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*—explicit content.)

But first, I beg, address your courtesy,  
You'll not ascribe it to vulgarity  
Though I speak plainly of this matter here,  
Explain to you their words and means of cheer;  
Nor though I use their very terms, nor lie.  
For this thing do you know as well as I:  
When one repeats a tale told by a man,  
He must report, as closely as he can,  
Every single word, as he remembers it,  
How vulgar it be, or how unfit;  
Or else he may be telling what's untrue,  
Embellishing, even making up things too.  
He may not spare, although it were his brother;  
He must as well say one word as another.  
Christ spoke very plainly, in holy writ,  
And, you know well, there's nothing rude in it.  
And Plato says, to those able to read:  
"The word should be the cousin to the deed."

**Classics:** Our course content is heavily biased in favor of classics over contemporary literature. Classics exude the values on which Western Civilization is built. We value timeless merit over fleeting and contemporary trends. *1984* (1949) and *Lord of the Flies* (1954) are the most contemporary books we read. Classics, and perhaps Western Civilization, are everywhere in retreat.

**Book Bans:** Some (surprisingly to conservatives) often banned or challenged books in America: *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *1984*. A group of Kansas parents attempted to ban *Charlotte’s Web*—talking animals and depiction of death.

**Ratings:** Movies, books, and the arts are rated by “age appropriateness.” Twin ideas are in tension or play: idealism (the world we long to see) and realism (the world we see). Most parents, culturally liberal or conservative, embrace this assumption: More idealism for wee ones, and more realism for maturing youth and adults. The liberally oriented tend to accept more sexual content and less violence, while the conservatively oriented are prone to the opposite—more comfortable with violence and less sexually thematic material. Many parents do not want their kindergarteners exposed to a “17 year old David carrying Goliath’s head around like a trophy buck,” nor do they want a story about “Amnon raping Tamar” told to their preschoolers. The appropriate age to expose young people to this violent and sexual Bible content (and all of literature and the arts) will always be debated.

**Class Time and Teaching Strategy:** “Overmuch talking” and “testing” on books are two tried and proven methods to kill student interest in and enjoyment of great literature (Mr. Keating in *Dead Poets Society*). Shakespeare never intended *Hamlet* to be “lectured on” or “tested over.” By passionately presenting great literature, pointing out themes to students, and skillfully enabling timeless characters to resonate with youth, I hope to create in the young a life-long affinity for great literature.

## **Books Read in World Literature**

### **English Bible, KJV**

Alerts: violence, suicide, sex, incest, rape, adultery, alcohol

We use the KJV version because of its majestic language (this is “World Lit”). Plus, I am most familiar with that version. It is a privilege to read with students passages depicting Jesus Christ, while observing the soaring language of the KJV. For instance, for truth and majesty, can you better “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”

We, of course, do not read Bible passages containing graphic violence or explicit sex.

### ***The Odyssey, Homer***

Alerts: graphic violence, alcohol, drunkenness, partying, adultery, sex, mythology

An ancient, heroic, epic myth, *The Odyssey* is one of the earliest extant works in Western Literature, dated at 800 BC.

We show that “heroic warrior tales” have always been popular and find their counterpart in contemporary action heroes. Greeks valued hospitality, loyalty, and homecoming, as well as cunning and deception (themes).

Students learn that men have always admired and aspired to greatness and heroism. Venerating and celebrating great people is one antidote for the enveloping gloom in American youth.

Youth also learn the benefits of contemporary (and only very recent) women’s rights. Though obviously a hero, Odysseus engages in various liaisons on his return to Ithaca—behavior in which Penelope could never engage. This male latitude was accepted as “normal” until recent decades.

### ***Oedipus Rex, Antigone***

Alerts: murder, incest, violence, self-mutilation, suicide, parricide

This classic emphasizes the Greek focus on hubris (pride) as the source of all evil and tragedy. Students focus on similarities between Greek beliefs and the Bible—pride as the ultimate human flaw (Isaiah 14:12-15). *Oedipus Rex* also focuses on themes of fate vs. free will. Teachers can easily demonstrate and contrast Greek belief in fate vs. Christianity’s benevolent providence and free will.

### **Plato: *Apology, Crito, Phaedo***

Alerts: civil disobedience, injustice, death, execution

Since we cover Socrates in Classical History, we read only excerpts from each of these important dialogues concerning the trial, rationale, and execution of Socrates.

Students discover why Socrates is called a “noble pagan.” Students also focus on Greek virtues: honor, reputation, honesty, moderation courage, wisdom instead of materialism and (shallow) public plaudits.

### ***Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle***

Alerts: references to “the gods” (mythology), themes of women and slaves not in keeping with contemporary values

Students learn Aristotle's invaluable contribution to Western ethics: the Golden Mean. A virtue is the median between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency. E.g., the virtue of courage is the Golden Mean between cowardice, a deficiency of courage, and rashness (recklessness), an excess of courage.

### ***Divine Comedy, Dante***

Alerts: violence, gore, lust, sex, sodomy

We read 5 of the 100 Cantos to give students an introduction to Dante's *magnum opus*. We attempt to portray the grandeur of this peerless classic.

Subject matter is sometimes graphic, particularly in the *Inferno*. Christian values of love and the mortification of lust, gluttony, sloth, greed, anger, envy, and pride are all depicted and reinforced.

### ***Les Miserables, Hugo***

Alerts: violence, harsh depictions of degradation and poverty, prostitution, degradation of women, child out of wedlock, sexual innuendo, suicide

One of the greatest of literary works, Hugo portrays the transformation of Jean Valjean, from hardened criminal (born of poverty) to Christlike and Messianic figure. Early in the story, Valjean ceases his criminal life and becomes a generous businessman and mayor. End of story? No. Mr. Mayor is "just getting started." He has yet to adopt the Christlike themes of self-sacrifice and death to self. The lyrics by Boublil and Schönberg to the Broadway musical put it best when Valjean reflects on his life's trajectory: "...this never-ending road to Calvary..." When Valjean is dying, he looks to the crucifix and exclaims, "Behold the Martyr." Valjean has completed his transformation into the image of Christ.

What a privilege to read this epic, reflect, and be inspired. We watch the great Broadway musical in conjunction with class reading. In class, we skip a couple songs from the musical over ribald content, most notably "Lovely Ladies."

### ***Phantom of the Opera, Leroux***

Alerts: violence, murder, sexual innuendo

Great, fun, exciting story. Its film and stage adaptations have made the story and music extremely popular. Students watch the movie in sync with class reading. The soaring music and stirring lyrics are an important component of the student experience.

### ***Count of Monte Cristo, Dumas***

Alerts: violence, murder, suicide

A student favorite, this classic is a riveting tale with themes of betrayal and revenge. Though the reader cheers as the Count executes revenge on his betrayers, the reader eventually discovers that revenge is a Gordian knot, an ageless illustration of why “ ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ saith the Lord.”

### **Faust: Literary survey of a “Bargain with the Devil”**

Alerts: violence, religious hypocrisy, marital discord, myth

The “Faustian Bargain” is based on an ancient German legend. Multiple writers and musicians have written and composed on the subject. We read short stories by Irving, Hawthorn, and Benét. We also listen to Charlie Daniels and “The Golden Calf” (from Faust, Gounod).

Material is vast and rich. What an opportunity to spend a week considering “trading one’s soul for earthly treasure.”

### **Man’s Search for Meaning, Frankl**

Alerts: starvation, brutality, violence, inhumane conditions, death camp themes

Listed on a 1991 Library of Congress rating of “10 Most Influential Books,” this inspirational work explores how the human spirit can triumph over the most inhumane treatment. Students are moved by this work.

Students absorb Frankl’s read axiom: “Man’s final freedom: to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s one way.” Viz., You can’t choose your parents, but you can choose your attitude about your parents.”

### **Anne Frank**

Alerts: persecution, disturbing Holocaust themes

A student education and experience is considered incomplete without the reading of this endearing and empathetic diary. Empathy, like kindness, is more "caught than taught." Perhaps, interaction with Anne can make a small contribution to maturing teens.

### **The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald**

Alerts: drunkenness, drugs, violence, language, adultery

This ever popular work, now a century old (1925) explores the shallowness, hollowness, and glitz of wealth, "success," and the rich. Fitzgerald reinforces "Midwest" values against the lure of "East Coast" glamor.