

LIT .235: Banned Books

To forbid us anything is to make us have a mind for it ~ Montaigne

Course Description

This course is a historical survey of texts that have been seized, burned, outlawed, and deemed obscene or sacrilegious, and whose authors have been stalked, fined, jailed and tortured under various political, religious or moral regimes. The focus is literature from the past two centuries, spanning diverse cultural and political contexts, as well as a few films now considered “classics.”

Course Objectives

The goal in the course will be to answer the following types of questions about writing and censorship:

- What types of texts are most typically censored?
- How has censorship been historically defended?
- Is censorship ever justified?
- Is there a link between formal experimentation and “obscenity”?
- How should writers create in a fascist atmosphere?

Course Format

This course involves a great deal of reading, writing, and discussion. Be prepared to read about 150 pages a week and to produce at least twenty pages of written work during the semester. Each class will begin with a short lecture, but the majority of class time will be focused on group discussion of the texts. Students are expected to come to class with ideas and questions. There are no “stupid” questions and no question will be treated as such by any member of the class.

Required Texts*

- Anonymous, *Go Ask Alice*
- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*
- Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mocking Bird*
- Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*
- Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*
- Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*
- Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*

Require Reading (online)

- Confucius, *Analects* (selections) (confucius.org/lunyu/lanage.htm)
- Charles Darwin, *Origin of the Species (Conclusion)* (talkorigins.org/faqs/origin/chapter14.html)
- Martin Luther, *Ninety-five Theses* (bartleby.com/36/4/1002.html)
- Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (ilt.columbia.edu/publications/machiavelli.html)
- Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html)

Additional reading assignments will come in the form of handouts: Richard Gibbings, "preface" *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* [vii-lxxxv]; "A Summary of the Index," from Francis S. Betten's *The Roman Index of Forbidden Books*, and selections from *Censorship in America* by Mary Hull; Richard Monastersky, "Demand for Their Data on Climate Chills Scientists;" Leonard Levy, "The Gay News Case;" Stanley Fish, *There's No Such Thing As Free Speech, and it's a good thing too!* ["Preface," "Introduction," Chapter 8 (102-119), Chapter 10 (134-140)] and Nat Hentoff, *Free Speech for me, but not for thee* ["Introduction" and "Chapter One"]; Holbrook Jackson, *The Fear of Books* [1-18, 137-159]; Charles R. Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica* [introduction] [pp. 1-9]; Upton Sinclair, "How to be

*Note for instructors: Texts were selected from *120 Banned Books: Censorship Histories of World Literature*, (Nicholas J. Karolides, Margaret Bald & Dawn B. Sova eds.) and the ALA's lists of most frequently challenged books.

Obscene" *New Yorker* (July 2, 1927); Gershon Legman, *Love and Death: a study in censorship* [7-24]; and Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* [introduction]

Films (shown in class)

- *Brazil*
- *A Clockwork Orange*
- *Fahrenheit 451*
- *The Last Temptation of Christ*

Class Participation/Writing Assignments (20% of final grade)

Students are expected to come to class prepared to discuss the text assigned. Failure to do so will significantly impact a student's final grade. Occasionally students will be asked to complete in-class written responses to the work. If students are repeatedly unprepared, quizzes will be given at the start of each class (please don't make me do this).

Student Presentation (20% of final grade)

Each student will give a 20-minute presentation based on a text we are reading and that focuses on, but is not limited to the following issues:

- Why might the reading be incendiary, offensive or dangerous?
- To which historical, political or cultural group would it likely appear so?
- Are there passages in which the author is subtle enough to escape or defy censors?

Your presentation will be given during the week we are discussing the text. This report must be photocopied and handed out to the class so everyone can follow along. Students may write the report as either a formal 4-5 page paper, or as an outline to which the class will refer during a more informal presentation. Students **MUST** consult an outside research source for these reports and document the source(s) using correct MLA guidelines.

Exams (20% each)

There will be a take-home "midterm" and "final." Each will require students to write five (5) pages. **Papers less than five pages will be marked down a half a letter grade automatically.** Instructions for the exams will be given a week before they are due.

Film Response (20% of final grade)

Students will write two, three-page papers based any two of the four films shown during the semester. These papers should:

- 1) give a brief summary of the film's plot;
- 2) provide an analysis of cultural, political, or psychological context in the film; and
- 3) discuss the film's relation to a controversial aspect of any of the texts read in class
- 4) be handed in **ON TIME** per the dates indicated in this syllabus