

## HUM/UWS 4a: Nobel Laureates in Literature

Fall 2021

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### **Bulletin description:**

Examines a diverse array of writing by Nobel Prize winners. Asks how Laureates exemplify values of idealism and excellence. Interrogates controversies related to prizes.

### **Course Narrative:**

This seminar designed specifically for the Humanities Fellow program will explore a culturally, linguistically, and generically diverse range of literature by Nobel Laureates. We will begin by exploring the humanistic values advanced by the Nobel Prize committee and then proceed to test the limits of this concept of ethical and literary worth. We will pay particular attention to the ongoing criticism of the western focus of the prize committee and delve into the 2018 scandal surrounding rape and sexual harassment among the committee members themselves. The central questions of the course will be the following: how are the core terms of the Nobel Committee's mandate interpreted (idealism, outstanding, pioneers)? How do European readers wrestle with writing informed by traditions other than their own? When and how does ideology obstruct or advance recognition of literary accomplishment?

### **Methods of instruction**

While brief introductory lectures will open our discussions, as befits a seminar for the Humanities Fellow program, the majority of class time will be spent developing insightful reading through collaborative dialogue. Learning to advance ideas, develop insights, and debate interpretations will be goals of the course. This emphasis on discussion will anchor a cycle of reading, discussion, writing, workshopping, revision, and feedback. Rooted in dialogue and collaboration, writing for the course will emphasize clarity of thesis, specificity of evidence, and responses to alternate points of view. Writing to and within a community of other readers is the practice we will cultivate.

### **Learning Goals:**

- a) exposure to contemporary world literature with a major audience
- b) opportunities to compare genres and values cross-culturally
- c) instruction in writing and research in the humanities

### **Texts for 2021:**

Derek Walcott, *Omeros*

José Saramago, *Blindness*

Orhan Pamuk, *My Name Is Red*  
Tomas Tranströmer, *Selected Poems*  
Mo Yan, *Red Sorghum*  
Bob Dylan, *Highway 61 Revisited*  
Olga Tokarczuk, *Flights*

**Assignments:**

- 1) Preparation, attendance, and participation. Students are expected to attend all class sessions on time and bring texts to class. Any student missing more than two class sessions will see a reduction in the participation grade proportionate to the number of absences. (Of course, in the case of suitably drastic emergencies, we can make an exception.) 20%
- 2) Portfolio of workshop feedback. During the writing workshops scheduled before each paper's due date, students will offer their peers written and oral feedback on their work. Written feedback (250 words per paper) will be submitted by the author of the original essay, and each student's portfolio of feedback will be assessed at the end of the semester. The portfolio will be evaluated on the basis of the timeliness, specificity, depth, and care evident in the feedback. 20%
- 3) Three essays: 3 @ 20% each = 60%. Essays will be evaluated on the basis of clarity of argument, specificity of evidence, depth of interpretation, and persuasive responses to alternative points of view.
  - a. *Theme exploration*: explain how one work studied this semester develops a theme from initial introduction through complicating elements to some sort of resolution.
  - b. *Genre analysis*: explain how one work studied this semester adapts expectations associated with a particular genre (e.g., detective fiction, the ballad, romance); you should make use of at least one credible source defining that genre. That definition of genre will serve as a "lens" for your reading.
  - c. *Values assessment*: compare two works studied this semester, explaining how they take different approaches to one of the humanistic values associated with the Nobel Prize. This paper should include original research on the author and reception of each work discussed. Please use at least six sources beyond the primary texts.

## Course Policies:

1. This course will make use of LATTE for assignment submissions and any syllabus updates. If the course is taught remotely, all Zoom links will be available on LATTE. Please ensure you have access to a computer and stable internet for any such sessions.
2. Copies of the readings will be available through course reserve, but students are urged to have their own copies if possible.
3. Any communications about changes to the course format or schedule—e.g., in case of weather or health emergency—will be made using the Course News and Announcements feature in LATTE.
4. All work is due on the dates listed on the LATTE site for this course.
5. Any student who wishes to request an extension for a course deadline should come to an agreement with the instructor at least 24 hours before the deadline.
6. Absences in excess of two allowed sessions will lead to a reduction in the student's participation grade.
7. Civility during class discussion is always expected. Civility allows for disagreement, but it does not allow for insulting or discriminatory behavior.
8. Students are always welcome to make appointments with the instructor during office hours or another mutually convenient time.
9. Brandeis seeks to welcome and include all students. If you are a student who needs accommodations as outlined in an accommodations letter, please talk with me and present your letter of accommodation as soon as you can. I want to support you. In order to provide test accommodations, I need the letter more than 48 hours in advance. I want to provide your accommodations, but cannot do so retroactively. If you have questions about documenting a disability or requesting accommodations, please contact Student Accessibility Support at 781-736-3470 or [access@brandeis.edu](mailto:access@brandeis.edu).
10. You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please consult [Brandeis University Rights and Responsibilities](#) for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity. Students may be required to submit work to [TurnItIn.com](#) software to verify originality. Allegations of alleged academic dishonesty will be forwarded to the director of academic integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include failing grades and/or suspension from the university. [Citation and research assistance](#) can be found on the [university library website](#).
11. If you are having difficulty purchasing course materials, please make an appointment with your student financial services or academic services adviser to discuss possible funding options and/or textbook alternatives.
12. Success in this four-credit course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of nine hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc).

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**Likely Course Schedule:**

**Week 1:**

Monday: Introduction to the themes and logistics of the course

Wednesday: The Nobel Prize—its history, values, and controversies

- The Nobel Prize committee's statement of goals at <https://www.nobelprize.org/>
- Kjell Espmark, "The Nobel Prize in Literature" in Agneta Levinovitz, *The Nobel Prize: The First 100 Years* (2001): 137-162.
- Topics for discussion: the purpose and effects of prizes, ideals of the Nobel Prize in particular, criticism of western bias of the prize, controversies surrounding recent awards

**Literary Themes**

**Week 2:**

Monday: Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (1990), Books One and Two

Wednesday: *Omeros*, Books Three, Four and Five

- Topics for discussion: defining a theme, taking note of pattern and variations. The aims of epic poem; Walcott's adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey* (brief selections provided in class). Caribbean ecologies and the long history of plantations.
- In-class exercise: comparing disciplinary perspectives on Caribbean ecology
  - Political science
  - Environmental studies
  - Literary history
  - Critical race studies

**Week 3:**

Monday: *Omeros*, Books Six and Seven

Wednesday: José Saramago, *Blindness* (1995): 1-113

- Topics for discussion: for Walcott, epic closure. For Saramago, reading for theme in the novel; illness as metaphor.

**Week 4:**

Monday: *Blindness*, 114-238

- Also: schedule a conference with the professor to discuss ideas for your first paper

Wednesday: finish *Blindness*

- Topics for discussion: dystopian imaginaries, post-fascist cultural memory, European peripheries, allegory.

**Week 5:**

Sunday: draft of theme paper due

- submit a draft of your essay to two peers. Drafts need not be complete but should, at a minimum, explain the thesis and include one close reading.

Monday: Theme paper workshop

- write up a 250-word response to each of your peers' papers and discuss responses during the class period

Wednesday: Theme paper due.

- In class, experiential learning session: visit special collections (live or virtual) to view miniatures

## Defining Genre

Week 6:

Monday: Orhan Pamuk, *My Name Is Red* (1998): Chapters 1- 16

Wednesday: *My Name is Red*, Chapters 16-33

- Topics for discussion: Todorov on genre, historical fiction, sources and interpretation, ekphrasis.

Week 7:

Monday: *My Name is Red*, Chapters 34-50

Wednesday: finish *My Name is Red*

- Topics for discussion: metafiction; mystery and resolution.

Week 8:

Monday: Tomas Tranströmer, selections from *17 Poems* and *Secrets on the Way* in *Selected Poems* (1987)

- Make an appointment for a conference with the professor

Wednesday: selections from *Bells and Tracks* and *Seeing in the Dark* in Tranströmer's *Selected Poems*

- Topics for discussion: lyric voice, mood, figurative language

Week 9:

Monday: selections from *Truth Barriers* in Tranströmer's *Selected Poems*

Tuesday: draft of genre essay due

- submit a draft of your essay to two peers. Drafts need not be complete but should, at a minimum, explain the thesis and include one close reading.

Wednesday: genre paper workshop

- Read your peers' essays and write up a 250-word response to each one and discuss responses during the class period.

## Values

Week 10:

Monday: Genre paper due. In class, watch and discuss clips from film version of *Red Sorghum*

Wednesday: Mo Yan, *Red Sorghum*, Chapter One

- Topics for discussion: the author's values vs. the text's, folk voices, black humor

Week 11:

Monday: *Red Sorghum*, Chapters Two and Three

Wednesday: finish *Red Sorghum*

Topics for discussion: nationalisms and revolutionary movements

Week 12:

Monday: Bob Dylan, *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965)

Topics for discussion: song lyrics vs. lyric poetry, surrealism, timbre, performance

Wednesday: Olga Tokarczuk, *Flights* (2007): 1-150

Topics of discussion: world literature and world culture, nomadism, genre mixing

Week 13:

Monday: finish *Flights*

Tuesday: draft of values paper due

Wednesday: values paper workshop; wrap-up and predictions for future prizes.

- Write up a 250-word response to each paper and discuss their responses during the class period.

Finals period: values paper due