

HONR100 The Grail Legend

Teresa Kennedy

I. Rationale Statement

This new honors first-year seminar is appropriate for the honors program in that it is intended to develop strong writing, research, and speaking skills for students who are interested in expanding their understanding of a complex, interdisciplinary topic that engages historical, literary, religious, and cultural questions both synchronically and diachronically. The Grail Legend is one of our most familiar cultural symbols, and as a symbol (an image that cannot be exhausted or reduced to one specific context) evolves and shifts in its meaningfulness depending on very specific historical and literary environments. This course will engage in assisting students to appreciate the evolution of this symbol and the way it is used creatively as an organizing principle in Western Culture. Interdisciplinary in design, students will have multiple opportunities to explore the use of this symbol in a variety of contexts.

In terms of the specific learning outcomes for the Honors Program, this course will focus on the evaluation of multiple disciplinary contexts. The origins of the Grail Legend are buried too deeply in our mythographic history to be clearly established, but the earliest records we have point its development in Celtic and Islamic legends (the magic cauldron) and the merger of that 'pagan' context with that of Christian theology during the 12th century, when the cauldron became the holy grail, the cup used by Christ during the last supper and brought out of the Levant by Joseph of Arimathea. Students will explore how this process of merger operates, and explore how the Grail Legend informs the Legend of Arthur, including its use in the propaganda that solidified regal power during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Students will then examine how the Grail Legend takes on a life of its own in the literary history of Europe, and develop an independent project that reflects solid methodology appropriate to their topic. Potential topics might be the use of the Grail Legend in Film and television (e.g. Excalibur, Merlin, Indiana Jones), in literary texts such as the poetry of Yeats or Eliot, or in the development of allegorical romances, including fantasy literature such as that of Susan Cooper or Mary Stewart. Alternately, students can choose to explore how history and myth can be disambiguated, and research the historical Arthur in contrast to the legends that surround him. As students develop their research, they will be able to work together and discuss how legends develop from multiple contexts, and learn how to synthesize independent research into a coherent whole.

II. Sample Syllabus

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Office Hours/Honor Code Boiler Plate

This course is designed to help student explore one of the most fascinating legends of the medieval and modern imagination: The Legend of the Holy Grail. The image of the grail is one that has importance in multiple cultural contexts, and students will be encouraged to research and develop an understanding of how myths and legends from diverse countries intermingle and share parallel sources for multiple purposes.

Learning Outcomes

The Honors Program at UMW wants students to focus on understanding appreciating the wide variety disciplinary approaches to learning that enhance an encyclopedia understanding of the liberal arts. To achieve this goal, students must be able to:

1. Understand how to evaluate information in the context of a discipline. How do differences in methodology affect our understanding of knowledge. Is a tree the same thing to a biologist as it is to a poet? Do philosophers understand the world the same way as a chemist? In this class, we will focus on understanding how discipline and method affect how readers and artists understand the legend of the grail. Is it just a story? What do we understand the grail means to different people in different periods?
2. Apply different interdisciplinary approaches to research, and explain why this strategy is important to genuine learning. For this class, students might want to consider the idea of the hero and how it has changed. Maybe examine how politics affect storytelling? How have women's roles changed over the course of time? How does an interdisciplinary approach help us understand the complexity of culture?
3. Develop your ability to explain, interpret, and evaluate arguments.
4. Develop your ability to verbally present your arguments and ideas in both informal discussion and in a formal presentation.

Upon successful completion of an FSEM, students will

5. utilize a variety of research techniques to retrieve information efficiently, evaluate retrieved information, and synthesize information effectively to support their messages or arguments;
6. improve development and organization of written arguments;
7. demonstrate the ability to edit and revise in the writing process;
8. apply the basic theories and principles of oral communication; and
9. communicate effectively in a variety of settings, including public speaking and group discussion.

Course Requirements

Attendance and Participation

My expectation is that students will be prepared for class, and ready to discuss the assigned reading thoughtfully.

Research Project

Each student will complete a research project that will contribute to a dialogue with your peers about the nature and development of the grail legend in history, myth, literature, or film. You will submit a formal research paper (7-9 pages) and a formal presentation of your work at the end of the semester. A schedule for developing your project is incorporated in the course outline below.

Journal

Each student should keep a journal to keep reflections and notes during the semester. In-class writing should also be kept in the journal. I will collect these periodically during the semester.

Final Exam

Required Texts

Jung, Emma. *The Grail Legend*. (Princeton 1998)

Loomis, R.S. *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*. (Princeton, 1991)

The Quest for the Holy Grail. (Penguin, 1969)

Eliot, TS. *The Wasteland*. (Norton, 1999).

On-line texts:

<http://www.arabiannights.org/>

Films: (screened in 139 on Monday night, or available in language lab)

Monty Python and the Holy Grail

Excalibur

Indiana Jones

Percival

Week One: Introduction: Healing Fiction

Reading: Jung, *The Grail Legend* (1-86)

Library Visit, Research Techniques

Film Screening: *Excalibur*

Week Two: The Power and Origins of Archetypes

Reading, Jung (90-100); Loomis (1-75)

In-class Writing and Discussion: Why do cultures need archetypes? Identify common archetypes popular today.

Week Three: The relationship of historical narrative to myth

Reading: *Arabian Nights*, selections. *Legend of the Grail: King Pellinore*

Writing and Discussion: Stories

Week Four: The Islamic Empire in Spain

Reading: Menocal (On Canvas)

Preliminary Bibliography Due with annotations

Week Five: Islam and the Grail Legend

Reading: Excerpts, Death of Arthur, Song of Roland (on canvas)

Week Six: The Celtic Origins of the Grail

Reading: Loomis, Celtic Grail Legends (On Canvas)

Week Seven: Myth, History, and Hegemony

Reading: History of the Kings of Britain, (On Canvas); Loomis, Legend of the Grail

Screening: Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

Week Eight: The Modern Appeal of the Meaning of the Grail

Reading: Eliot's Wasteland, Dante's Inferno Cantos 1-15, 27-34

Thesis Paragraph due

In Class Writing: Eliot and Dante

Week Nine Spring Break

Week Ten: Writing Workshop

Draft is due; peer revision; POST DRAFTS ON CANVAS

Week Eleven: The Role of archetype in the modern

Reading: Eliot, Jesse Watson (On Canvas)

Discussion of Formal Presentations; second draft is due

Week Twelve: Presentations

Week Thirteen: What is a symbol?

Screening: Indiana Jones

Final Draft is due.

Final TBA

I will provide papers and video artifacts for assessing outcomes as they are articulated above.