



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • *Curriculum Development Project*

Religious Experience in the Short Story

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Abstract:

Lived religion, be it in relation to sacred texts, ritual, doctrine, community, or personal insight, can be an essential part of the human experience. This course will help students explore the varieties of religious experience through the form of the short story: a particularly powerful literary vehicle for distilling critical moments of revelation, love, and faith, as well as confusion, hate, and doubt, as can be seen in each of the classic stories suggested below. The class will be a culminating experience of literary analysis for high school seniors, but in addition will introduce the practice of examining lived religion in a respectful way that does not favor one faith over another, honors those who claim no religion, and encourages empathy and deep engagement with the issues that confront the characters in our texts.

Curricular and Community Context:

This is a spring term (11 week) class for high school seniors at a small independent college preparatory school in Sandy, Utah, where individual class size is 20 or fewer. Each student brings her own laptop to class. Approximately 50% of our students belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon). Historically our school has restricted the study of religion to an ancient history class taken in the eighth grade. The administration has been hesitant to bring lived religion into the curriculum for several reasons: fear of threatening our identity as a secular school, concern that Mormonism would be overrepresented and thereby unfairly privileged, and worry that Mormon families (and others) might consider a discussion of religion in school an inappropriate distraction from what their children learn at home and at church.

Learning Goals and Essential Questions:

This course uses short stories as a way into -- to use William James's phrase -- 'The Varieties of Religious Experience'. While some initial research into questions on religious history, practice, and doctrine will be required, the essence of this class will be literary engagement with the questions that the characters are wrestling with in short stories like those listed below.

Essential questions for discussion and analysis will include: What is good and evil? How do the seen and unseen worlds connect? What is the individual's relationship with her faith community? What is our obligation to our fellow beings? Why is there suffering? How do faith and doubt manifest themselves? By using their close reading skills to understand the characters in these stories, and learning the compassionate art of civil discourse, students will become more comfortable with discussing faith in its many manifestations -- an integral part of the liberal arts tradition, and essential tool in our pluralistic democracy.

Suggested Texts:

John Updike, "Pigeon Feathers"

- A teenager is undone when neither his clergyman nor his parents can respond to his existential crisis with spiritual assurance.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Spinoza of Market Street"

- A Jewish intellectual who has spent his life devoted to rational philosophy, reconnects with his faith and discovers joy when he marries the widow next door.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown"

- Goodman Brown ventures into the forest outside Salem village and is confronted with disturbing characters that threaten his faith in his Christian community.

Jumpa Lahiri, "This Blessed House"

- An American Hindu couple disagree about what to do with the Christian paraphernalia left by the previous owners of their new house.

Grace Ogot, "The Rain Came"

- Labong'o, a village chief, must choose between love for his daughter and the survival of his village.

Arthur C. Clarke "The Star"

- In this science fiction story, a Jesuit astrophysicist is part of a crew returning to Earth after a mission that has yielded data—soon to be revealed to everyone— that has shaken his faith.

Flannery O' Connor, "Parker's Back"

- O.E. Parker searches for meaning amidst the harsh judgements of his fanatically Christian wife and his obsession with tattoos.

Leslie Marmon, "The Man to Send Rain Clouds"

- On an Indian reservation, a Catholic priest is asked to participate in a native burial rite.

Levi Peterson, "The Confessions of Augustine"

- A middle aged Mormon man reflects on the summer he was eighteen, when he delighted in exploring "the profane world."

Rudolph Fisher, "The Backslider"

- A young man on the brink of repentance is cast out by his Harlem congregation. (story is written in 1920's African American dialect and include use of the n-word)

Activities/Assignments:

- Weekly reading quizzes
- Socratic seminars with student-generated discussion questions
- Non-literary responses to texts: collection of visual art images and music on shared Google doc or Padlet
- Two in-class essays
- Final Assignment: One fiction piece that addresses a theme we have identified in two or more of our texts.

Sample Lesson Plans:

Day 1

- 5 minute free write (typing or writing continuously, even if it's nonsense) on the question: "What is religion?"
- Chalk Talk 1: Students pick one of their own definitions of religion from their free writes and write it on giant stickies on the wall.
- Read aloud sections of Nongbri's *Before Religion*, Chapter 1
- Chalk Talk 2: "What are the challenges of talking about religion?"
- From Chalk Talk 2, generate discussion guidelines that support a safe and inclusive classroom.

HOMEWORK: Updike: "Pigeon Feathers".

Day 2

- Identify questions on Christian theology, Lutheran practice, and philosophy that arise in "Pigeon Feathers."
- Have small groups research questions using approved online resources and databases, then report to whole class
- Teacher-led whole class close reading of the story
- (If time) Introduce Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life Religious Landscapes Study.

HOMEWORK: Each student picks a religious group (different from their own) from the Pew Study (including Unaffiliated, Atheist, and "Nothing in Particular") Their assignment is to explore the research and prepare a 2 minute presentation on their group's beliefs and attitudes, social and political views, and demographics. They should be ready to tell the class what information they found most surprising.

***For information about the Religious Worlds of New York
summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching
on religious diversity, see: www.religiousworldsnyc.org.***