

CLEMENTE COURSE
IN THE HUMANITIES

LITERATURE AND DIGNITY

DR. SARAH HIGINBOTHAM

BARD COLLEGE

In the last 220 years, the Supreme Court has invoked the word “dignity” in more than nine hundred opinions, including the landmark 2011 case mandating prison population reduction in California (*Brown v Plata*). The concept of dignity undergirds mandates to respect people’s legal personhood, their equality, their liberty, and their personal integrity. The way we understand human dignity informs how we think about people’s fundamental rights: How do we punish people? How do we distribute goods and services? How do we treat those with limited political, cultural, or socioeconomic power? This literature course will examine how human dignity — the fundamental and innate value of a person — is explored in great works of literature.



Professor and Teaching Assistants



Dr. Sarah Higinbotham



Kathryn Higinbotham,
Georgia Tech



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Tuesdays 5:00 p.m. 8:00 p.m..

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Important Dates

September 10

October 1

November 5

November 12

First Class

First Essay

Commonplace Books

Second Essay Due



Materials

REQUIRED

Hamlet, William Shakespeare

Bacchae, Euripides

Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison

Articles, chapters, and poetry
assigned on syllabus

WEBSITES

[Dr. Higinbotham's Website](#)

[Common Good Atlanta](#)

EVALUATION

Every assignment will have specific and thorough guidelines that explain the project. You can access the assignment information on the course website. You can also discuss an assignment with me before it's due. While the assignments themselves are challenging, you should never feel lost or confused about the actual parameters of an assignment or my expectations. If you do, please ask questions in class, make an appointment to see me, or e-mail me.

PARTICIPATION: Make every effort to be present and engaged in class.

FIRST ESSAY: In "The Lesson for Today," Frost says that he "had a lover's quarrel with the world." How do his other poems support, or not support, this statement? Use examples to support your answer. Due October 1

SECOND ESSAY: The course has focused on the concept of "dignity," or the right of a person to be valued for their own sake. Choose one work of literature from the semester and write about how dignity was upheld or denied. Due November 12

PRESENTATION: Take 2 minutes to share your work and what you learned on November 12

COMMONPLACE BOOKS: See handout

ASSIGNMENTS



RALPH ELLISON



Ralph Ellison

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

“Plagiarism,” from the Latin word for kidnapping, is presenting another person’s work as your own. When you deliberately use someone else’s language, ideas, images, or other original material or code without fully acknowledging its source by quotation marks as appropriate, in footnotes or endnotes, in works cited, and in other ways as appropriate, the work is not your own.



Flannery O'Connor

MISTAKES ARE WELCOME

A writing teacher I admire, Nick Carbone, has this to add about plagiarism: Unfortunately, the term “plagiarism” is more technical than practical. It’s used to describe equally mistakes in handling and citing sources and deliberate cheating and lying about the authorship of the work you hand in. In fact, one refuge of many cheaters is to say that they merely made mistakes in source handling. So by plagiarism in this course I want us all to distinguish between fraud and cheating, which is always wrong, and mistakes in learning, which are inevitable, correctable, and for many people, necessary for learning. Mistakes are welcome; deliberate fraud is not. (“Talking about Plagiarism: A Syllabus Strategy”)

THE QUALITY OF FAILURE

One of the greatest obstacles to learning is the fear of failure. Students have sometimes been taught that they need to be perfect—or as close to perfect as possible—in order to be validated, approved, and rewarded. But I think that there are things far more important than perfection: curiosity, risk taking, persistence, integrity, self-awareness, and often failure itself. I want you, in the words of Edward Burger, to make for yourselves “a mind enlivened by curiosity and the intellectual audacity to take risks and create new ideas, a mind that sees a world of unlimited possibilities.”

For this reason, part of the course will involve addressing how you handled failure this semester in the Clemente Course. Have you been willing to challenge yourself and take risks that might result in failure? Have you been aware of when you have failed, and refused to give up in the face of failure? Have you found ways to use your failure to create something new and interesting? Have you grown from your failures? I hope that you will allow yourself to take risks and learn from them.

DISAGREEMENTS

I think most of what I have learned that is of any consequence has arisen from disagreeing with someone else. I welcome your respectful disagreements with me. If we all interpret what we read and discuss in the same way, we have a problem, because no true thinking will occur. At the prison where I teach, the new students are very hesitant to disagree with their peers, or me, because in the prison universe, disagreements almost invariably escalate into violence. But the students -- both inside prisons and outside -- gradually learn that disagreements make the classroom environment more interesting, productive, generative, and challenging. Our classroom is not Plato's Cave.

Please note that the college classroom is a place where ideas are exchanged respectfully. I look forward to an environment where this will occur, but I don't have much tolerance for distracting behavior, such as rudeness, texting, sleeping, or talking to others during class. If your participation is disruptive to the classroom discussion, if it creates a hostile, intimidating, or offensive environment, you are subject to removal from the classroom at my discretion.

REVISION

You have the opportunity to revise any of your projects this semester. The ability to accept and act on criticism is one of the most important critical abilities you can develop. Can you hear constructive criticism with an open mind, build on lessons learned, and make revisions in response to suggestions? If so, I will assess your revised project a second time. A revision isn't just a quick fix of the obvious errors, but a "re-vision," or another look at your project, in which you address feedback. If you choose to revise, it can only help, not hurt your grade. The revision must include a cover letter, in which you explain to me what and why you revised what you did.



The Tragedy of King Lear, William Shakespeare

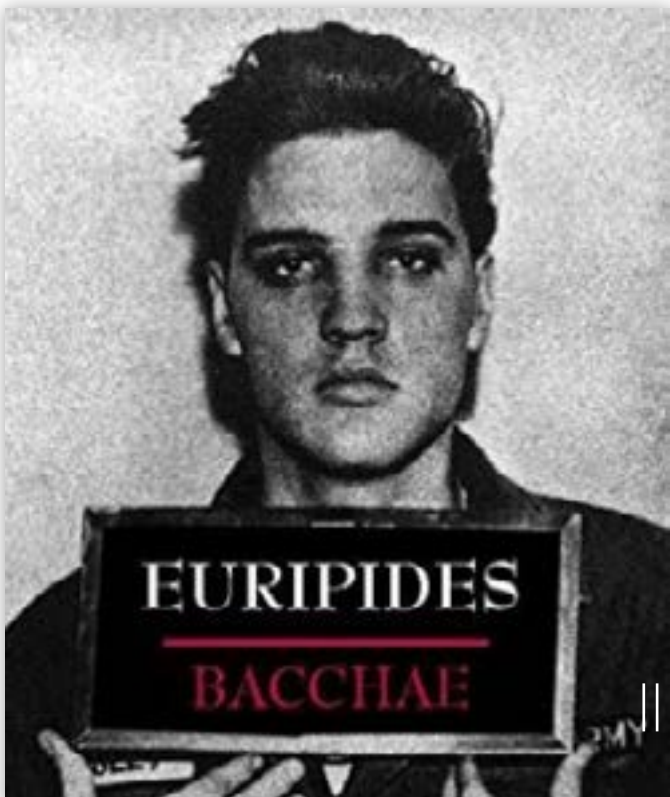
Revisions are due one week from when you receive a grade and feedback from me. If you revise an assignment, I will average the two grades as your assignment grade.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS

In order to make the evaluation process fair to students who submitted their work on time, I will accept late assignments only if you communicate with me about it before the assignment is due.

CLASSROOM POLICIES

In addition to respectful, engaged participation, I have the following classroom policies: 1) no laptops unless we are specifically using them, for example during the writing workshop days; 2) cell phones on silent and in your bags; 3) you should ask at least two questions or make two comments in each class. If speaking during class is extremely uncomfortable for you, you may write down your comments and/or questions and give them to me at the end of class. Alternatively, if you are very enthusiastic about speaking in class, please refrain from making more than five comments or asking more than five questions. You may write down what you were not able to say and I will read it after class. This is to keep the entire class equitably participating during the time we have together.



CURIOSITY

"Continually seeking what lies beyond your horizon is curiosity." -- Nick Sousanis

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Week 1

September 10

“Allegory of the Cave,” Plato

Week 2

September 17

“Mending Wall” and “After Apple Picking,” Robert Frost

“There’s a Certain Slant of Light” and “I Felt a Funeral in My Brain,” Emily Dickinson

Week 3

September 24

Writing Workshop: Tutors present to work on essays individually

Week 4

October 1

Frost essay due

Unflattering, Nick Sousanis 1-67

Week 5

October 8

Hamlet William Shakespeare, *act 1*

Week 6

October 15

Continue *Hamlet*

Week 7

October 22

Selections from *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison

Week 8

October 29

“Revelation,” Flannery O’Connor

Writing tutoring night

Week 9

November 5

Commonplace Books Due

Bacchae, Euripides

Week 10

November 12

Second Essay Due

Presentations