



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Proposal

The attached document contains the narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful proposal may be crafted. Every successful proposal is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the program guidelines at www.neh.gov/grants/education/enduring-questions for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Education Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: NEH Enduring Questions Course on Literature and Morality

Institution: University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Project Director: Padma Viswanathan

Grant Program: Enduring Questions

Can Good Books Make Us Better People? Our search, in stories, for how to be.

Padma Viswanathan, University of Arkansas

Anecdote and science both have advanced the theory that reading fiction can make us more compassionate. James Wood, in *How Fiction Works*, quotes a Mexican police chief who prescribed literature to his officers because, he said, “Risking your life to save other people’s lives and property requires deep convictions. Literature can enhance those deep convictions by allowing readers to discover lives lived with similar commitment.” And a 2012 *New York Times* article cites research demonstrating that our olfactory cortex is activated by reading the word “cinnamon” or “lavender,” while the site for physical co-ordination is stimulated by reading “Pele kicked the ball.” By extension, the article said, researchers have found “...substantial overlap in the brain networks used to understand stories and the networks used to navigate interactions with other individuals... It is an exercise that hones our real-life social skills, another body of research suggests—that individuals who frequently read fiction seem to be better able to understand other people, empathize with them and see the world from their perspective.”

Such benefits may accrue from the reading of fiction; they may also be overstated for rhetorical purposes. Skeptics abound, especially within the literary camp. “If it were true,” said Stanley Fish, in the *New York Times* on another occasion, “the most generous, patient, good-hearted and honest people on earth would be the members of literature and philosophy departments, who spend every waking hour with great books and great thoughts, and as someone who’s been there (for 45 years) I can tell you it just isn’t so.” One might add that, if writers are also great readers, why do sexual corruption, neglected children, and narcissism feature in so many literary biographies?

The gulf between imaginative empathy and moral behavior seems like a wide one. And what, at a more basic level, is the relationship of empathy to morality? Northwestern professor

Gary Saul Morson's study of *Anna Karenina* ends with a list of "163 Tolstoyan Conclusions," one of which speaks directly to this point: "Each person is a natural egoist who sees the world as if it were a novel in which he or she were the hero or heroine, but morality begins when a person can see the world as if he or she were a minor character in someone else's novel."

Still more fundamentally, what sort of "morality" are we talking about here? What does it mean to be "good," let alone "better?" This course will start by proposing various definitions of morality, across history and culture. We will also begin to discuss the ways that stories have, since our earliest extant literatures, been used for moral instruction—the ways human societies appear long to have presumed that the answer to the course title question is "yes." What qualities inhere in stories such that so many diverse cultures have used them for moral instruction?

For the first unit of the course, **Religious and Originary Texts**, we will read from the *Mahabharata*, the *Qur'an*, the *Bible*, and Greek myth. An overwhelming majority of the students I teach are culturally Christian; many have been raised religious. I don't know how many have the chance to reread the Bible as an enduring literary text, nor how they will react to a debate on whether its literary value can make better people of non-Christians, such as myself. My best guess, based on several years of teaching here, is that they will meet this experience with generosity and curiosity—as will I—which is why I am eager to try it.

Many of these students will have read Greek myth as literature, not so much as moral instruction; many might not have considered that the *Qur'an* is both a literary production and a declaration of cultural values. I am in debt to my own cultural background for my intimacy with Hindu myth and have employed the *Bhagavad Gita* (a key dialogue from the *Mahabharata*) variously in my dramatic and fictional writings. While I can speak to those texts on both of those levels, though, our discussion will be informed also by historical and philological sources.

The second unit is **Teaching Tales, Fairy Tales and Moral Entertainments**. In it, we will read the allegorical stories of Aesop and the *Panchatantra*, to discuss their more obvious messages and simpler story values. We will also weigh their possible formative influences and discuss how we encounter these “children’s” stories as adults. These discussions will continue as we read fairy tales, from the straightforward, if heavily symbolic, *märchen* of the Grimm brothers to the inventive, ambiguous stories of Hans Christian Andersen. This unit will conclude with selections from *The Arabian Nights* tales and Dante’s *Inferno*, moving away from children’s stories into darker and more challenging territories.

I have previously taught only a small number of the above-named texts—faculty development is an aim of this grant program, so I’m pleased to attest to a steep learning curve—but I have been gratified by my success in teaching literary analysis to upper-division undergraduates at the University of Arkansas. Although I teach primarily as a writer of fiction, my methods are intended to enable any avid reader of literature to parse and critique any literary text, as well as his or her own reaction to it. Over these first few sections of the course, students will also learn to analyze narrative texts for their literary value and effects. Students must become conversant in character development; narrative perspective; description; dialogue; doubling and repetition; metaphor; story structure, including withholding and suspense; and the creation and use of dramatic conflict. We will evaluate the ways various texts evoke or elide truths, as well as the uses of beauty, including the times when such uses might be suspect. How do these literary values operate in the stories under consideration? And how do moral questions arise? What is the relationship between the quality of a literary text and its potential moral effect? Participants will be asked to tease out the moral axes in each text—to describe a character’s decision points, for example, and how these emerge out of and thereby reveal his or her nature; or to discuss whether or how a narrative offers the possibility of different, equally plausible avenues.

I suspect it will be a relief to students to be able to voice their ideas on morality in a more explicit way than is generally encouraged in literary analysis. I frequently find that a moral standpoint is part of a given student's reaction to a text—he or she might find a character's actions abhorrent, for example, and so be unable to go beyond this visceral reaction to provide a balanced or compelling analysis. My hope is that our discussions will unite these impulses, and provide students the means to articulate, parse, and even evaluate their own moral positions, while performing similar literary actions on the texts we are reading together.

The third unit, **Satire**, is a bit shorter and lighter than the first two. We will read Aristophanes, Jonathan Swift, and Molière, discussing such matters as the role of the satirist as both insider and outsider and the ways that humor and caricature work with and against our natural desires to identify with fictional characters. What is worthy of being mocked? What is 'bad' behavior, and how can writing or reading about it make us 'good'?

The final unit is called **Colonial Encounters and Cosmopolitanisms**. My hope is that our discussions will by this point be subtle and wide-ranging. Students should be able apply the tools they have acquired to an eclectic selection of novels, the sorts of books they might pick up on their own; the sorts of stories they might even, someday, write. How precisely can we articulate the moral concerns at the center of a given contemporary text? How do we, as writers, engage morality in the writing of literature? Is it possible that moral indecision could make us better writers, and better people? If so, how?

Nota bene: readers of this proposal may have already noted that this course responds directly to the theme of "Bridging Cultures." It seems to me that the most exciting approaches to the questions I have posed jump from these into discussions of cultural encounters and cultural relativity through history.

ENVISIONED COURSE DESIGN: It's a common undergraduate misunderstanding that to state something categorically is to be more persuasive. The writing of fiction doesn't lend itself easily such statements, however, and I frequently see greater complexity in my undergraduates' creative writing than I do in their argumentative work. At my institution, however, there are only two regularly offered upper-level undergraduate courses in which students write fiction, one of which is a fiction-writing workshop. One of my key intentions is to help fulfill a need for more courses in which students read published literature, but wrestle with it by means of fiction-writing, an underused means of teaching literary analysis.

I am hoping that this class will attract third and fourth year undergraduates from a wide array of disciplines. We will meet once a week for 3 hours, over 16 weeks. Each week, students will bring a reader response in which they describe some salient literary feature of the text, identify a moral question they have found in it, express contradictory views that they themselves hold on both, and ask a question. For the first 80 minutes of each class, I will give them background on the text, dissect it in various ways, and take preliminary questions. After a short break, students will have 15 minutes for an in-class creative writing assignment. Then I will divide them into small groups, where they will discuss two questions I provide, as well as the questions they have brought, and make brief notes on their discussion on the back of their reader responses. I will circulate among the groups, eavesdropping and facilitating. The final half-hour will reunite the class for a large-group discussion, after which students will turn in their reader responses for me to grade.

I will give three major assignments:

1. A 5-7 page paper discussing the moral values of a text discussed in class. It may be written in conventional essay format, or in the form of a dialogue or play, using personae to represent the various sides of the issue.

2. A 6-12 page short story that proceeds from a clear moral dilemma, but treats it in a complex and not easily reducible way; to be accompanied by a 1-2 page reflective essay on the writing process, incorporating subjects discussed in class.

3. A final portfolio, which will be composed of another short story or a substantial revision of the one submitted earlier, a 1-2 page reflective essay on the writing or re-writing process, and a short informal essay reflecting on the course, to be read aloud in class.

COURSE PREPARATION AND DISSEMINATION: Before I teach this course, I will spend eight months reading through, refining and expanding my bibliography, and developing my syllabus. My list of secondary sources is by no means exhaustive or final. Since this teaching approach is largely new to me, I expect to develop pedagogical strategies in the course of my preparation, and further reading lists to pursue these, as well as a list of essays, scholarship and practical criticism to assist me in illuminating the texts and issues under discussion. I will also, in this time, “workshop” (to deploy some Creative Writing jargon) my syllabus with writers and professors of literature, philosophy, and other related disciplines at my institution and elsewhere, to get their opinions and recommendations for further reading, discussion questions, and teaching methods.

After teaching this course twice, I would propose a panel discussion on the title question—**Can Good Books Make Us Better People?**—to the AWP Conference, the annual gathering of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, which convenes writers, students and teachers of writing from across North America. This would allow me to present the results of the course and discuss these with interested colleagues. I would also propose a talk about the course to the Arkansas Philological Association for their annual conference. Finally, I will be redesigning my website this year, and putting a “teaching” section on it, which could include the design and results of this course.

Can Good Books Make Us Better People?

Padma Viswanathan, University of Arkansas

CORE READING LIST

Average reading approximately 120 pp. per week. Editions subject to change. By unit and week:

Introduction:

1. Gordon, Mary. "Moral Fiction". *The Atlantic Monthly*, Fiction Issue, August 2005.
- Gass, William. "Goodness Knows Nothing of Beauty: On the Distance Between Morality and Art," in *The Bread Loaf Anthology of Contemporary American Essays*, ed. by Robert Pack and Jay Parini, pp. 108-121, Middlebury College Press. 1989
- Boygoda, Randy. "Faith in Fiction". *First Things*, August/September 2013.

Religious and Originary works:

2. Narayan, R. K. *The Mahabharata: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic*. University of Chicago Press, Reprint edition, 2013.
3. Selections from: Anonymous. *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
4. Selections from: Anonymous and Abdel Haleem, Trans. *The Qur'an*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
5. Graves, Robert. *The Greek Myths*. Penguin Classics, 2012.

Satire:

6. One play (tba) from: Aristophanes and William Arrowsmith, Trans. *Four Plays by Aristophanes: The Birds; The Clouds; The Frogs; Lysistrata*. Plume, 1984.
7. Selections from *Gulliver's Travels*, in Swift, Jonathan. *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift*. Norton, 2009.
8. *The Misanthrope*, in Molière and Richard Wilbur, Trans. *The Misanthrope and Tartuffe*. Mariner Books, 1965.

Teaching Tales, Fairy tales and Moral Entertainments

9. Selections from Aesop and Robert Temple, Trans. *The Complete Fables*. Penguin Classics, 1998. Selections from Sarma, Visnu and Chandra Rajan, Trans. *The Pancatantra*. Penguin Classics, 2007.
10. Selections from Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, and Jack Zipes, Trans. *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*. Bantam, 2003. Selections from Andersen, Hans Christian and Jan Pienkowski, Trans. *Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales*. Puffin, 2010.
11. Selections from Anonymous and Malcolm C. Lyons, Trans. *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1001 Nights*. Vol. 1, 2, 3. Penguin Classics, 2010.
12. Selections from Alighieri, Dante and John Ciardi, Trans. *Inferno*. Signet Classics, 2009.

Colonial Encounters and Cosmopolitanisms

13. Behn, Aphra. *Oroonoko*. Penguin Classics, 2004.
14. Selections from Chekhov, Anton and Constance Garnett, Trans. *The Essential Tales of Chekhov*. Harper Perennial, 2000.
15. Calvino, Italo and Archibald Colquhoun. *The Nonexistent Knight and The Cloven Viscount*. Harvest Books, 1977.
16. Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home*. Mariner Books, 2007.

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