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—Harold McFarland
Midwest Book Review

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History of World Literature

(48 lectures, 30 minutes/lecture)
Course No. 2300

Taught by **Grant L. Voth**
Monterey Peninsula College
Ph.D., Purdue University

A Buddhist monk, a pig, two dragons, and a mischievous monkey embark on a sacred journey to locate the mystical texts of their faith. Will they complete this holy task, or will they be waylaid by adventures along the way?

Stranded in a remote abbey, lords and ladies from the French court pass the time telling stories about life and love. What do their stories reveal about the nature of men and women—and about the storytellers themselves?

Deep in the African continent, members of a native tribe contend with encroachment by European missionaries and conquerors. Will their noble leader find a way to co-exist with the interlopers? Or will their ancient culture be lost forever?

Do you recognize these stories? They are drawn from some of the greatest literary masterpieces the world has ever known. As different as they are, these great works each reflect a common impulse: our need to tell stories. Whether around the campfire, between the covers of a great book, or in the theater, this urge to express life's meaning is a human constant.

In **The History of World Literature**, you'll sample these and other brilliant masterpieces that reflect this deep need for self-expression. It's a journey that will take you around the world—from the enormous auditoriums of Ancient Greece, to the dazzling courts of Classical China and Japan, to the prison camps of Stalinist Russia, to a quiet study in the home of a 19th-century New England spinster.

Your guide on this enchanting literary tour is distinguished scholar Grant L. Voth. An experienced teacher, critic, and lecturer, Professor Voth provides the perfect introduction to the history of world literature, offering concise summaries and thought-provoking interpretations of each work.

"Tell Me a Story"

As Professor Voth explains, "As long as there have been people in the world, there have been stories." In this course, you'll sample some of the greatest literary expressions the world has known and experience storytelling in its many forms, including poetry, drama, and narrative.

The course begins in the ancient world, where tribal bards created national myths and founded religious texts out of legends, history, philosophy, and local lore. From there, you'll travel to the Far East to encounter the brief, suggestive, and deeply personal lyric poets of Classical Japan and China.

You'll also wander the countryside and aristocratic courts of India and the Middle East, collecting

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This course works well in all formats. There are more than 70 images and hundreds of on-screen quotations and text to help reinforce the key terms that Professor Voth discusses.

Course Lecture Titles

1. Stories and Storytellers
2. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*
3. The Hebrew Bible
4. Homer's *Iliad*
5. Homer's *Odyssey*
6. Chinese Classical Literature
7. Greek Tragedy
8. Virgil's *Aeneid*
9. Bhagavad Gita
10. The New Testament
11. *Beowulf*
12. Indian Stories
13. T'ang Poetry
14. Early Japanese Poetry
15. *The Tale of Genji*
16. *Inferno*, from Dante's *Divine*

Comedy

17. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*
18. *1001 Nights*
19. Wu Ch'eng-en's *Monkey*
20. The *Heptameron*
21. Shakespeare
22. Cervantes's *Don Quixote*
23. Molière's Plays
24. Voltaire's *Candide*
25. Cao Xueqin's *The Story of the Stone*
26. Goethe's *Faust*
27. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*
28. Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*
29. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*
30. Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*
31. Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*
32. Dickinson's Poetry
33. Ibsen and Chekhov—Realist Drama
34. Rabindranath Tagore's Stories and Poems
35. Higuchi Ichiyō's "Child's Play"
36. Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*
37. Joyce's *Dubliners*
38. Kafka's "The Metamorphosis"
39. Pirandello's *Six Characters*
40. Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*
41. Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem*
42. Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country*
43. Faulkner—Two Stories and a Novel
44. Naguib Mahfouz's *The Cairo Trilogy*
45. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*
46. Beckett's Plays
47. Borges's *Labyrinths*
48. Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

stories and folklore of magical men, terrifying beasts, alluring women, and conniving tricksters that live on in today's fairy tales and bedtime stories.

Subsequent lectures follow the evolution of the art of the story as it appears in sophisticated narratives such as Wu Ch'eng-en's *Monkey* and Voltaire's *Candide*; the poetic masterpiece of Dante's *Inferno*; the great drama pioneered by Shakespeare and Molière; and other works of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment.

With the coming of the modern world, you'll trace the rise of Realism in the works of Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, and Ibsen and the development of experimental modes by Brecht, Beckett, Borges, Rushdie, and Pirandello.

The Author's Toolkit—Revealed!

Professor Voth also gives you the tools you need to appreciate these great literary works and understand how authors, playwrights, and poets throughout the centuries have practiced their craft.

Each lecture focuses on one or more great works and uses those works to shed light on how authors create literary meaning through theme, character development, images, and narrative technique. Along the way, you'll encounter an array of remarkable literary innovations, including:

- The paradoxical and profound blending of history and literature in the Hebrew Bible
- Geoffrey Chaucer's use of multiple narrators and "framed" stories to reveal character in *The Canterbury Tales*
- The farcical plots and exaggerated characters employed by Molière to send a social message in the theater of 17th-century France
- The revolutionary focus on the ordinary and mundane as the subject of tragedy seen in Flaubert's petit-bourgeois housewife, Emma Bovary
- James Joyce's brilliant use of stream-of-consciousness to replicate the workings of the human mind in *Dubliners*
- Fyodor Dostoevsky's creation of one of the first great anti-heroes with the unnamed narrator in *Notes from Underground*.

With each work, Professor Voth offers guidelines for interpretation that suggest the most profound asset of great literature: its inexhaustible richness.

Consider, for example, the ancient saga about a Germanic chieftain, *Beowulf*. With its tales of swordplay and dragons, mead halls and thanes, this epic poem has meant different things to different critics. Does *Beowulf* tell of Europe's pagan past, or does it reflect newly developing Christian values of community and service which were transforming Northern Europe during its composition? Is it a parable about the uses and misuses of heroism, or a meditation on humankind's losing battle with the universe?

As Professor Voth demonstrates, there is no single correct answer to these kinds of questions. While exploring these works with Professor Voth and on your own, examining the great traditions that have fed their development, and hearing what renowned critics have had to say, you'll gain the insights you need to develop your own interpretation of these masterpieces.

Go Behind the Stories

You'll also learn the stories behind these works of art—the fascinating lives of great authors. Here's a quick glimpse into some of the intriguing anecdotes you'll hear:

- Miguel Cervantes wrote the sequel to *Don Quixote* so he could kill off the title character and thus deter other authors from publishing pirated versions of his creation.
- Soviet poet Anna Akhmatova once held a 17-month vigil outside a prison awaiting the release of her son. She was inspired to write her poem *Requiem* when a woman recognized her and asked if she could describe the scene.
- Mark Twain struggled to complete *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a seemingly simple tale that far outgrew his original intentions. He set it aside a number of times over the course of several years before finishing it.
- A true "Renaissance man," Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore was a poet, novelist, dramatist, essayist, teacher, musician, and painter. He founded a school that became a university and wrote music and lyrics for 2,000 songs, including the national anthems of India and Bangladesh.
- Throughout her short career, Emily Dickinson worked entirely in seclusion, and published very few works in her life. After her death, more than 1,700 poems were found—written on scraps of paper, tucked into books—all over her house.

You'll also see how great literary works—whether adapted from age-old tales or newly created—reflect the concerns of their cultures. From the epic strivings of the ancient world, to the desire for order and reason in 17th-century Europe, to the epistemological uncertainty of the modern world, you'll see how the gravest concerns and deepest aspirations of each culture can be found in the

stories they tell.

Through it all, you'll experience the powers of a great storyteller firsthand, as Professor Voth captures what's compelling about each literary masterpiece through engaging, comprehensive summaries that let you decide which authors, works, and movements you'd like to learn more about.

Are you ready for a good story? Join Professor Voth for this tour of **The History of World Literature**, and prepare for an enriching and satisfying excursion around the world and into the human imagination.

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