

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT OBSERVATION REPORT

Instructor: Ilse Schweitzer

Observers: David Alvarez & Rachel Anderson

Topic: Rollo May and American myths

Course: ENG 204: Mythology

Date: April 8, 2016 (9:00-9:50)

Description

Before class began the students were chatting warmly among themselves. Dr. Schweitzer began class by introducing the two visitors and by telling the students that they should just act like their "usual selves." Dr. Schweitzer then asked students what they thought of the reading. After hearing a variety of responses for about ten minutes, the instructor deftly summarized the main points of the students' observations and noted the importance of the transition the class was making from a discussion of medieval myths to a discussion of present-day myths.

Dr. Schweitzer then went on to tell the students that she wanted them to work in pairs to discuss a question that she wrote up legibly on the board, namely, "what are some of the most powerful images and symbols in the American experience?" Animated discussion ensued throughout the room and once it died down Dr. Schweitzer asked them to reconvene. What followed was a wide-ranging discussion of various myths and icons about and of American identity, e.g., the outlaw, the gunslinger, The Statue of Liberty, The Lone Ranger, Manifest Destiny, the West, and the self-made man, among others.

After some discussion of these myths and icons, in which a majority of the fifteen students present participated, and which either Dr. Schweitzer and the students themselves often connected either with Greco-Roman myths (e.g., Proteus) or with current debates (e.g., over immigration), the instructor connected the students' remarks with a specific passage in the assigned text for the day, a selection from Rollo May's *The Cry for Myth*, a small segment of which she read aloud. The passage, in which the author claims that Europeans have a much deeper sense of history than Americans, led to another wide-ranging discussion, this time about the differences between American understanding of the past and of myths. After one student pointed out that Americans have iconic landscapes such as the Grand Canyon, Dr. Schweitzer pulled up an image of the Grand Canyon, as well as images of Mt. Rushmore, the Devil's Tower, the Capitol, The Golden Gate Bridge & the Statue of Liberty, which once again led to another wide-ranging and interesting discussion in which students came up with a variety of perceptive observations in response to Dr. Schweitzer's thoughtful questions, questions that encouraged them to make connections between their present and prior reading for the course on the one hand, and their own understanding of America's past and present on the other.

Dr. Schweitzer concluded the class by asking students to reflect upon the manner in which landscapes create myths, or reflect our mythic identity back to us.

Evaluation

Both observers agreed that this was an excellent class, well organized, well paced, and intellectually stimulating. Dr. Schweitzer didn't just 'go over' the text, but really asked students to engage with it and, occasionally, question it, especially in regards to what the text doesn't/didn't do regarding Native American mythology and peoples.

Throughout the class, Dr. Schweitzer spoke in a clear voice and engaged the students in a warm manner. We took as signs of a successful class the fact that a majority of students voluntarily participated in discussion throughout the hour as well as the fact that they all talked animatedly among themselves when asked to discuss the reading in pairs or groups. We also took as a sign of Dr. Schweitzer's teacherly acumen the way in which she encouraged quieter students to participate.

Throughout the class, Dr. Schweitzer explained the reading and the relevant concepts carefully, helped students make connections between the day's reading and their previous reading, or deftly fleshed out connections that the students made on their own or other points they raised. All her questions were focused and apropos and one segment of the well-structured class flowed seamlessly into the next.

In conclusion, the clarity of Dr. Schweitzer's instructions and explanations (already evident in her syllabus for ENG 204), the engaging manner in which she responded to student observations, the variety of methods with which she got the students to engage the materials, and the well-timed class structure all made for a first-rate session.