

DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE ASSESSMENT PLAN

I. INTRODUCTION

The discipline of Comparative Literature is devoted to the comparative critical study of literature in its many aspects, across boundaries of language, nation, or region. Both graduate and undergraduate students in the Comparative Literature Department at the University of Wisconsin, Madison study literary and cultural texts in their original languages *comparatively* across strategically specified historical periods, geographical areas, and literary and cultural movements. Comparative Literature, then, is the site for the critically informed, linguistically and culturally fluent study and understanding of the diversity of literatures and cultures.

Our mission, reconsidered and discussed by the department faculty and students in a series of meetings held over the course of the fall semester of 1996, remains as stated in the Department's Strategic Plan submitted to the College of Letters and Sciences in December of 1993. That mission is defined by critical reflection on and practice of the explicitly and rigorously *comparative*. We compare--rather than simply juxtapose--artistic expressions and productions across institutional disciplines. We critically reflect on and compare the historical and cultural constructions of those expressions and productions that we appropriate from other disciplines. We compare "high" and popular and mass traditions both within a specific culture and between cultures. We compare pre-contact 'literary' and cultural traditions and post-contact alphabet based literary traditions of colonized areas.

Drawing from this mission, our intellectual and pedagogic foci are dual:

- the ways in which literature has been *contextualized* by the problematics of a) patronage and authorship; b) national boundaries and identities; c) historical periods, schools, and movements; d) genre and mode, including rhetorical, prosodic, and other formal features; and,
- the ways in which literature is being *recontextualized* by the problematics of a) discourse; b) culture and ideology; c) race and ethnicity; and d) gender and sexuality.

Literary and cultural fluency in languages other than English forms the fundamental basis for considered and thoughtful investigation of any of the issues above. Thus, both our graduate and our undergraduate students (as all of our faculty) are trained in foreign languages and literatures--at least one foreign language for undergraduate Comparative Literature majors and two or more for graduate students. Attention to the language of foreign texts against the backdrop of the student's own language (or a third language) and consideration of texts from clearly defined and specified critical and theoretical vantage points offer our students a solid ground for discovering, questioning, integrating, and transmitting literary and cultural knowledge and values.

This emphasis does not foreclose a consideration of the question of translation. Rather, our department is uniquely situated to take up translation as a problem--particularly in relation to issues of interpretation and understanding across (the "trans" of translation) different heritages, traditions, and boundaries. Translation--for those who are able to compare the translated with the original texts--is ideal for studying the ways in which literary values are shaped and the formation of literary and cultural canons in a global context.

The Comparative Literature faculty, its undergraduate and its graduate curricula, and hence its students are strategically trained to pose and address fundamental questions about the place of the literary text in cultural traditions, in aesthetic and philosophical thought, and in society in general. Amidst, on the one hand, the proliferation of information and the dearth of critical frameworks for understanding either that information or those modes of cultural and literary expression which refuse or elude the status of information and, on the other hand, amidst the potential erosion of specific, fine-grained linguistic and cultural fluency and understanding, Comparative Literature offers its students both that fluency and a comparative critical frame for understanding and transmitting the knowledge and understanding gained from comparative literary study.

II. EDUCATIONAL GOALS FOR GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

The translation of the intellectual and pedagogic mission described above into a schematic list of educational skills and goals might be as follows:

A.

For the undergraduate student in Comparative Literature,

- a) literary fluency in at least one language other than English;
- b) comparative understanding of and ability to analyze a range of literary texts;
- c) intellectual familiarity with the critical and theoretical concepts of literariness and of the comparative;
- d) critical familiarity with the literary canon in the field of comparative literature;
- e) critical thinking, reading, and writing skills to enable the expression and transmission of "a" through "d."

B.

For the graduate student in Comparative Literature:

- a) literary fluency in two or more languages other than English;
- b) reading knowledge of a classical or major non-western language;
- c) comparative understanding of and ability to analyze a broad range of literary and cultural texts and to focus more intensely and strategically on specific areas within that broad range;
- d) fluency in literary critical and theoretical concepts of literariness, of culture, of the comparative;
- e) familiarity with the three major historical-literary fields of the ancient and classical periods, the medieval to renaissance periods, the 17th century to the modern period;
- f) fluency in the theories and practices of translation as it relates to the field of comparative literature;

- g) critical familiarity with the literary canon in the field of comparative literature;
- h) the ability to discover, examine critically, integrate, preserve, and transmit knowledge in the comparative literary field.

III. ASSESSMENT IN THE UNDERGRADUATE MAJOR:

Undergraduate majors in Comparative Literature are introduced to and trained in specific modes of comparative literary analysis as well as general concepts of literariness and of culture. In this way, our majors can develop important skills in critical thinking, reading, and writing. Our undergraduate curricular emphasis on literary fluency in at least one language other than English and on comparative understanding and analysis of a range of literary and cultural texts are our primary undergraduate goals. More specific goals are itemized in II.A above.

Thus, under the supervision of the Comparative Literature Undergraduate Director in conjunction with the departmental Chair, the following assessment plan will be launched. This plan includes the review of undergraduate majors' records/files in early summer of each year by the Undergraduate Director in conjunction with the Chair.

a. Entry point assessment:

After declaring their major, for which students must have taken at least one of the two requisite departmental literature survey courses in a specific historical period (CL 201, 202, or 203), students will be required to take CL 310 (Introduction to Literary Criticism) as an entry point to upper division work in the major. The results of that (writing intensive) class will be used to assess the ability of majors as they enter the department.

b. Progress assessment:

As they proceed in their work in the major, the grades and performance in the 3 required foreign literature classes (3 - 5 classes for "Honors in the Major" students) are reviewed as a means to monitor linguistic and literary proficiency in a single foreign language. This proficiency, gained outside the department but fundamental to comparative literary work, is also assessed in Comparative Literature courses as students work in those courses on the literatures in the original language on which they have chosen to focus.

Additional assessment of critical thinking, reading and writing skills is the goal of the two required (and writing intensive) courses in literary criticism and theory (CL 371 and/or 475).

c. Conclusion of major:

The capstone seminar (CL 690) is a writing intensive required course for all Comparative Literature majors. The small course format on a focused comparative topic and the discussion and writing requirements for that course constitute the basis for the assessment of our majors as they conclude the major.

In addition, for our Honors in the Major students, a Senior Honors thesis is required. The results of that effort will be presented, and honored, in a gathering of the department in the spring of each year.

Students who do not elect the Honors in the Major option or who do not qualify for that option may still choose to write a senior thesis. They too will participate in the end-of-the-year presentation and celebration of work in the major. The work of all Comparative Literature undergraduate majors will be eligible for a yearly essay prize award.

Finally, in a small department of eight faculty members, each one of us comes to know the abilities and academic work of virtually all of our students. We take an active and regular role in reviewing our undergraduate program, its majors, our requirements and curricular offerings. This faculty familiarity with our undergraduate majors and with their work, in conjunction with the review of the majors' records conducted at the end of each academic year by the Undergraduate Director in conjunction with the Chair, will offer an effective and manageable means of assessment

We have also recently begun to more consistently follow and keep records on the post-graduation whereabouts, occupation, and achievements of our undergraduate majors. We anticipate this will be a further means of "assessment" as we seek to maintain closer contact with our alumni.

IV. ASSESSMENT IN THE GRADUATE PROGRAM:

The goals and objectives of the Graduate Program in Comparative Literature are itemized in II.B above. Assessment in the graduate program is under the supervision of the Graduate Director, who is also chair of Graduate Review Committee (GRC) and conducted in cooperation with the departmental Chair:

a. Entry point assessment

Assessment at the onset of the graduate program is done through the Graduate Director's review of graduate student application materials, particularly and most importantly the review and assessment of the student's requisite writing sample and statement of purpose. Additionally, assessment at this point in the program is also based on prior course work, on foreign language training, and to a lesser extent, on GRE scores. The files of accepted incoming students are further reviewed for possible fellowship nomination by both the Graduate Director and the TA and Fellowships Committee.

b. Progress assessment

There are a series of progress assessment measures in place at each stage of the graduate program. Foremost among them is the review, at the end of each academic year, of the files and progress of each of our graduate students by the Graduate Review Committee (GRC) under the supervision of the Graduate Director (who is usually the Chair of that committee). Letters evaluating the academic and intellectual progress of each student are sent out yearly by the GRC to both the graduate student and to the graduate student's advisor.

There are, in addition, a series of assessment measures to evaluate accomplishment and progress in each of the areas specified in the graduate "Educational Objectives" in II.B above.

--Assessment of literary and linguistic fluency in a second language is made by the "Examination in a Second Language" usually taken in April of the first year of graduate

study.

--Assessment of foundational knowledge in selected literature (based on the first two years of graduate course work) and in theory and criticism in the field of Comparative Literature is the object of the "Second Year Examination," usually taken in April of the second year of graduate study.

--For those students who are offered TAs in the department (and we try to offer at least a semester or two to all of our students before the end of their graduate careers), training in and the practice of teaching in Comparative Literature, of communicating to an undergraduate audience the basic premises of the field, are assessed by both the supervising professor and the T.A. Review Committee at the end of each semester in which the student works as a T.A.

--Assessment of broad field knowledge in three areas--two of which are delineated by the student in close consultation with her advisor and Ph.D. committee, one of which must be comparative literary criticism and theory--is achieved through the three written essays that constitute the Ph.D. preliminary examination. Those written essays are then the basis of a subsequent oral examination at which all three of the Ph.D. committee members are present as well as two additional departmental members. This promotes the same faculty familiarity with virtually all of the graduate students and their work as in the case of the undergraduate program.

--Within six weeks of successful completion of the Ph.D. prelim exams and oral, the student meets again with her committee to present an initial draft of a dissertation proposal.

This intensive series of planned stages in the graduate program, though demanding for faculty and student, are a means to ensure close supervision of graduate work and to allow the continuing assessment of progress and achievement in the discipline.

c. Conclusion of graduate major

--For a Ph.D. student, the culmination of her graduate career--the integration and articulation of what she has discovered, questioned, critically examined, and preserved--is transmitted in her dissertation. The closely monitored progress of work on the dissertation and the final product itself are the culminating means of assessment of the student's graduate career in the discipline.

--Finally, the professional placement of our graduate students is a post-graduate marker for assessing the quality and effectiveness of our graduate program and its training of students. We will continue to maintain contact with our former graduate students, their professional careers, and their general whereabouts through an updated departmental database on names, addresses, and affiliations.

V. A BRIEF REFLECTION IN CLOSING ON THE ROLE OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND ITS GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS IN THE LIBERAL ARTS MISSION OF A MAJOR RESEARCH UNIVERSITY AT THE CLOSE OF THE 20TH CENTURY

In addition to the concluding paragraph of section I., we reiterate the closing statement in our Strategic Plan contribution. That is that we believe we have a unique and important role to play

in relation to the humanities and arts mission of the College of Letters and Sciences. It is a role made even more critical by the proliferation of information and illustration in a global age--but a proliferation most often starkly lacking in a framework within which to situate, critically examine, understand, and assess-as-knowledge that information.

Comparative Literature is by definition "diverse," since we are trained to study literature and culture without the restriction of specific boundaries of one language, one national formation, one geographical area, one identity, or one collectivity of any sort. Hence, as part of our disciplinary mission, and as part of our relation to the liberal arts mission of the College, we are able to examine and evaluate--assess, if you will--new theories, methodologies, and emerging literary phenomena. The pluri-lingual and comparative nature of our discipline, our training, our curricula, our graduate and undergraduate programs ensure that differences among peoples and their literary cultures will be studied and respected, that our students and faculty can, with open and critical minds, "discover, examine critically, integrate, preserve and transmit knowledge, wisdom [hopefully], and values."

Please note: most of the mechanisms for the graduate and undergraduate program assessment plan described in these pages are already or soon will be in place. We anticipate a fully operational experiment with the system outlined here by fall of the coming academic year (1997-98) but will begin to implement as much of it as we can in the coming spring semester.