

THE HUMAN SITUATION A CELEBRATION

1977-2017

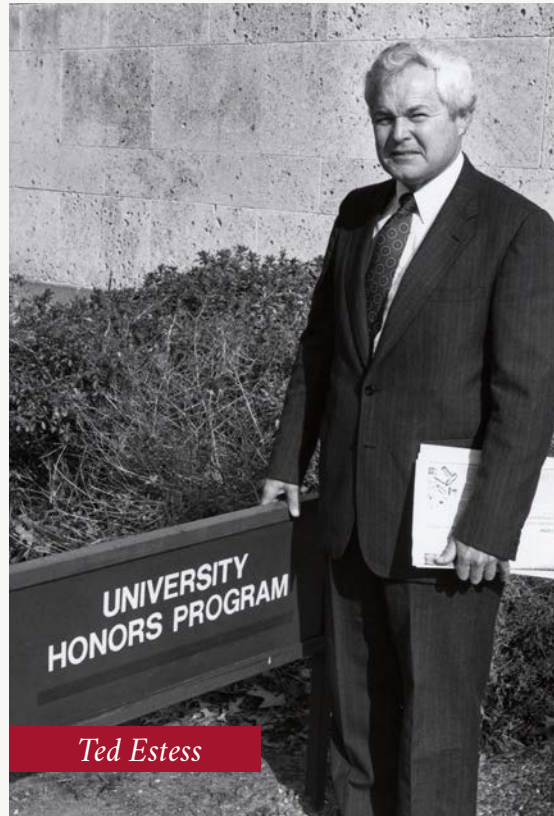


UNIVERSITY of **HOUSTON**
THE HONORS COLLEGE

IN THE BEGINNING

Dr. Ted Estess, founding dean of the Honors College, is responsible for doing so much to develop and steward the Human Situation, which remains as the College's signature course. In 1976, Honors Program Director Donald Lutz heralded the arrival of his successor, Ted Estess, in the upcoming spring semester, saying that "Estess will be teaching ... one of those courses which inevitably leads to a deeper examination of the self. In short, if a college education is supposed to be, at least in part, a process of self-discovery, this course will be extremely useful toward that end."

As we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Human Situation, we are still dedicated to making a transformative impact on our students' lives by introducing them to great books and grand challenges, to the best that the library carrel and the seminar room have to offer, and to co-curricular challenges beyond the hedgerows. In the following pages, you will hear from current students, alumni, and teachers, past and present, as they share what the Human Situation course has meant to them, and you will see how we celebrated this unique 'rite of passage.'



Ted Estess

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
Honors Program

THE HUMAN SITUATION: Ancient Greece
Syllabus

179

Course numbers: ENGL 2301 (six semester hours)
IDHF 2397 or 3397

Instructors: Bernard Langfur
Danford Roemer
Estess Sirignano

As the title indicates, this course has two foci, which at its best moments conjoin. First, we speak of the human situation, as if there were basically one situation, shared by all human beings throughout history. To what extent can one properly assume this? That is an underlying question of the course. Were it not so awkward, we might put the first part of the title thus: THE? HUMAN SITUATION.

Second, we focus upon Ancient Greece. Out of all the civilizations which belong to the far origins of our own, only Greece and Israel left a wide range of writings, so that access may be possible to their modes of experiencing the world. These writings, moreover, had an enormous direct influence on the development of the West.

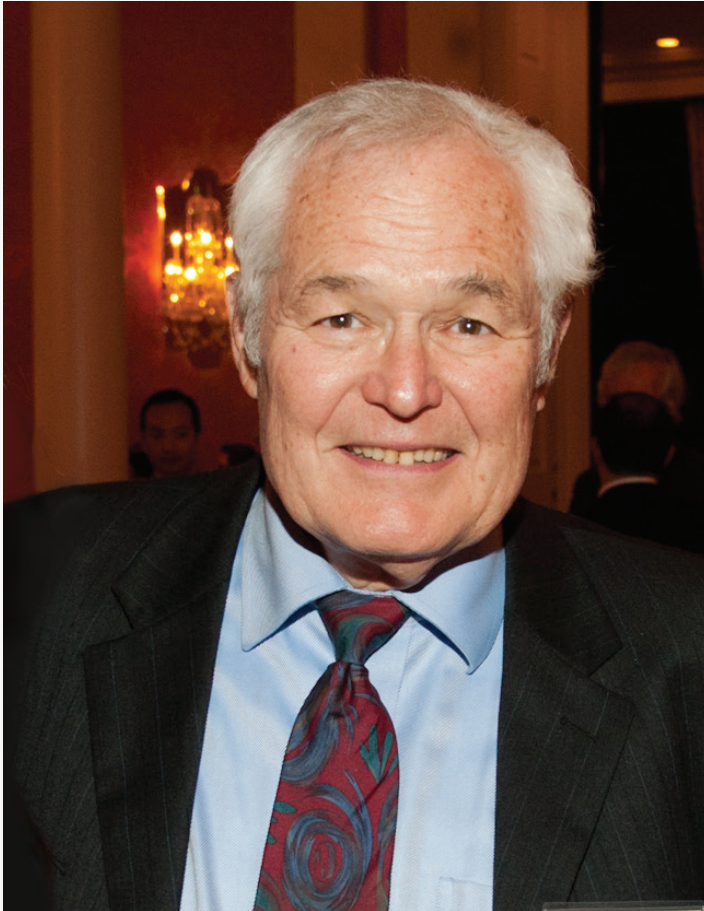
The two foci may be brought together as follows. In reading Homer or Plato, Euripides or Aristotle, one asks them questions which matter to one. But suppose one doesn't have such questions? In fact it can also happen that in the course of reading them and talking about them, one discovers the questions which matter to one. The process is spiral-like: in reading the texts certain questions occur to one, and in listening to the texts for answers to these, one hears things which give rise to still deeper questions.

We shall read the following:

Homer's Odyssey (Fitzgerald translation)
Sophocles Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus
(University of Chicago Press--Sophocles I.)
Euripides The Bacchae (Arrowsmith translation. Euripides V
in the University of Chicago Press.)
Aristophanes The Clouds (Arrowsmith translation.)
Plato The Apology (In The Last Days of Socrates, Penguin.)
Plato The Republic (In the Bloom translation. Basic Books.)
Aristotle The Nicomachean Ethics (Ostwald translation,
Modern Library.)

A COMMON EXPERIENCE

By Ted L. Estess
Founding Dean, The Honors College



And secondly, I was interested in faculty who were committed to undergraduate education, who were in conversation about what the students were studying. And these faculty needed to be dedicated to the Honors College program, so that we wouldn't be dependent on what other departments made available.

I was interested in an academic community of faculty in which a conversation could take place, not just for one semester, but two semesters, or over a longer period of time. So those were two things, both a community among students and a community among faculty, coming together into a single academic family.

Of course, the students and faculty have many things in common—popular culture, for example. But we wanted to talk about some ideas. Intellectual matters. Human matters. Things that matter in the human situation. My situation, their situation, all of our situations.

Then we wondered, what books should we read? The common experience could be any number of things. First, we decided to read books from antiquity, in the intellectual tradition of the West—Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Virgil, St. Paul, St. Augustine. Several years later we added a second course, modernity, to pick up where antiquity left off.

We freely admit that the Western canon is not the only intellectual tradition in the world. We hope students will be engaged enough to say, "You don't do enough in the East. If we're interested in some serious questions, we're going to have to read some other books." This ten-hour course in foundational texts is meant only as a shared starting point.

By the fall of 1977, a small faculty committee was hard at work on a book list. In addition to myself, the committee included Stephen Langfur, a wonderful teacher and extraordinary thinker who played a tremendous role in shaping the Human Situation course; classicist Tony Sirignano; and Allan Mandelbaum, a brilliant teacher, scholar, translator, and poet.

People often ask how the Human Situation came into being. When I was asked to come to the University of Houston to direct honors education, one of the things I was interested in, because of the liberal arts college where I had been teaching in upstate New York, was a common experience for students.

The energy of a big university is centrifugal—things go away from the center. That's why sports can be so important, centripetal—they bring people together. I thought a common academic experience at the University of Houston was equally necessary because, though there was a core curriculum, students didn't have those courses in common.

“ What

is the good life?

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what is required?”

We had to do a lot of recruiting down at the registrar's office, to get the names of incoming students who would be a good fit for Honors. Many UH students weren't in school full time, and the academic profile was not what it is today. Instead we were looking for other qualities, such as a hunger, a desire to learn, a capacity for hard work. We interviewed each one and ended up with a group of 75 students when we started the fall semester. They were terrific, energetic people from all disciplines. Engineers together with business students, and business students together with English, political science, and chemistry majors.

We started that fall with four of us teaching: Stephen Langfur, Tony Sirignano, a fine scholar named Mary Gearhart, me. We met a great deal, and we had a sense of creating something—something new—and that drew people in. We knew that it might not last, but there was a possibility that it might, and that gave us a sense of excitement. But more than that, we just enjoyed talking. We enjoyed reading

books and asking questions. What is the good life? If one is to live a truly full and flourishing human life, what is required? How do we deal with human catastrophe and the loss each of us faces? The books didn't provide the answers to any of life's significant questions, but they gave us resources. Motifs emerged, such as friendship, suffering, shame, honor, guilt, hope.

We read the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Oresteia*, the *Oedipus* trilogy, Plato's *Republic*, excerpts from the Old and New Testaments. We had a daunting reading list that fall. And the students were expected to write five, five-page papers and one, 10-12-page paper. In that longer paper, they were supposed to cover at least three texts on some particular subject.

We were overly ambitious about what our students could do. We realized that students didn't read everything and didn't master everything. Nevertheless, they worked, and they turned in five, five-page papers and one, 10-12-page paper. It was a serious enterprise, but it was great fun. It was something like a boot camp. If you went through the Human Situation, you knew it.

As a consequence, now that we've been going forty years, whenever you see someone from the Honors program, a fellow student, you say, "Hey, what'd you do in the Human Situation, who was your teacher?" It's the common experience. Not only while they're students here, but as they become alumni, a common experience over time. And that's what a broad liberal arts education can do for you.



JOINING THE GREAT CONVERSATION

By William Monroe
Dean, The Honors College

The following is an adaptation of a lecture given on the first day of the semester in 1986.

Robert Hutchins, an administrative genius who became president of the University of Chicago at the astonishing age of 29, branded a general education open to each and all as “The Great Conversation.” The defining characteristic of this great, common conversation is “dialogue ...Nothing is to remain undiscussed. Everybody is to speak his [or her] mind. No proposition is to be left unexamined.”

Conversation as described by Hutchins is not something performed merely for the sake of entertainment or to pass the time, although civilized conversation in that social sense is certainly an art worth cultivating. Since much of our public discourse degenerates into sound bites, we may not readily distinguish a true conversation from the narcissism and pomposity of Twitter and other social media.

What honors education at the University of Houston encourages, especially in a course such as the Human Situation, is a different sort of discourse, one in which careful reading, respectful discussion, critical and creative thinking, and various modes of writing are provoked by classic texts. Why do we take a major texts or great books approach? In part because these books have stood the test of time: They have supported thoughtful interpretation and stimulated disciplined conversation in ways important to the moral, social, political, religious, and economic lives of individual persons. They pose intriguing questions about how to live one’s life. They lead us to address questions about body and spirit; about families, communities of faith, and political congregations; about violence, persecution, and confinement; about the individual and society; about the king and the prophet; about laws and the Law; about the gods and God. The reading list varies from year to year, but we remain guided by careful consideration of what others have written, and we attempt to discover our own ideas and commitments by speaking and writing about



these texts. By thoughtful reading, speaking, and writing we enhance our participation in the great conversation.

I.

Now I want to talk a while about the Human Situation course itself, how it will be taught, how our time together will be organized, and how we will put into practice our commitment to the great conversation. Reading is foundational and thus the natural place to begin. As J. Hillis Miller says, reading is a joyful activity that can bring insight, freedom, power, and surprise. It also requires vulnerability, for we can never know just what is going to happen when we read.

Another way to say this: thoughtful reading implies a relationship with the text. For those of us who will present (and be present) at this podium, our relationship to a text becomes public when we teach what we have read. According to Miller, the chief thing a teacher displays to his

or her students is not scholarly and historical information, but a 'method of reading in action.'

In our Human Situation course, we teachers publicly display our methods of reading in action, and while we inhabit this space, we model that relationship. In the lecture part of the Human Situation course, students are observers of a relationship of reading, overhearers of the teacher's interaction with the book, and it is that interaction, that relational activity of reading, that will be displayed during the lecture portion of the course. If we do our lecture-teaching well, you all will be able to see and to feel our responsibility to the text at hand; you will be able to sense the fact that we acknowledge an obligation to the text as we would honor an obligation to a friend, and this relationship will seem to be a 'current event,' or, to borrow language from my own college days, a 'happening.' This happening should occur whether or not you like the book or concur with the method or approach. To converse, let us continually remind ourselves, it is not necessary to agree.

That said, there should be some guidelines. Good conversations should be open and accessible: methods of reading should not be esoteric. One good way of developing a relationship to the text is by asking three key but simple questions: "What does it say? How does the author know? What difference does it make?" As students, you don't need teachers with, as English Showalter writes, "pat answers and ready-made formulas." As teachers, we don't need colleagues to tell us what to read and why. Rather, we need someone with experience and judgment, patience, and flexibility, willing to talk the situation over.

II.

It is in the discussion sections that we talk the human situation over. It is there that we become active, equal partners in the conversation. Reading by itself is not enough. First, you converse with a book, then you converse about the book by discussing it with other readers. By talking about a text, by comparing your ideas with those of others, even by revisiting ideas using your own way of speaking—by such

discussion, you take possession and establish ownership of a book. We begin the transfer of our reading experience into our various human situations by making a book our own. This modification is essentially a process of assimilation, or more accurately, synthesis. The act of reading is in fact a synthesis of the old and the new; what we read is the new seen in terms of the old, such that the old is modified and challenged by the new. The new (book) must be seen in the context of the old (self), but the new changes the old—and in the process changes who we are. When we take possession and really own the

texts that we will be reading together this semester—the *Odyssey* and the

Apology, Genesis and Mark, *Oedipus the King* and *Antigone*—and when we let them

take possession of us, we allow ourselves to be altered such that we are never quite the same. The process results in a new person—a new you, a new me.

So far, so good. But becoming a new person, it hardly needs to be said, is often an anxious and difficult process. Right now, in fact, you may feel exposed and defenseless against us, your peers, and the texts that you will read. A feeling of vulnerability is natural, even desirable; but with luck and care, you will grow stronger, so that you can not only understand more readily and more profoundly, but will also be able to



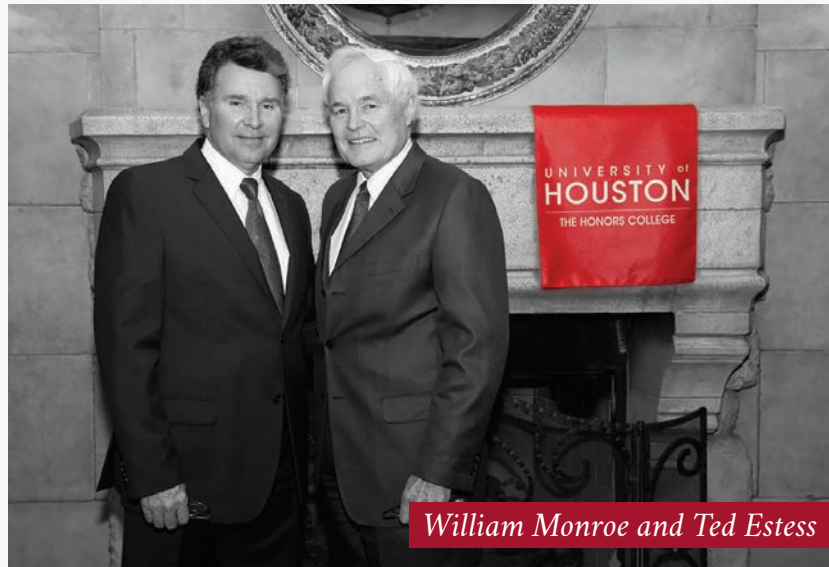
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and believe.”

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defend yourself against the powerful words, the seductive rhythms, and the verbal blandishments you will encounter throughout your life. You will meet these pressures not only from teachers, of course, but from advertisers, commentators, salesmen, lawyers, Tweeters, and even musicians—whether Garth Brooks or Lady Gaga, U-2 or Motley Crue, The Beatles, The Killers, or The Cure.

These various voices are both fascinating and intimidating, because each in its own way has the power to move us, to alter our beliefs, values, and desires. In studying the human situation, we hope you will learn to collaborate with powerful voices—Odysseus and Telemachus, Socrates and Plato, Abraham and Moses, Paul and Augustine—voices that embody powerful ideas.

Why are ideas both fascinating and intimidating? One big reason is that a true idea is always connected to other ideas that lead to or follow from it. Unlike a fact or a one-off opinion, an idea is always part of a family, and the old saw about marriage holds true: when you marry yourself to an idea, you marry a family as well. Some of the family members are likely to be embarrassing, inconvenient, or downright dangerous. Another reason ideas are frightening is that they have the capacity to generate other ideas, and thus we don't know beforehand where an idea may lead us. And finally, ideas are always capable of yielding more than one argument or position—unlike mere opinions. Thus, ideas are never safe havens where we can sit confidently and rest secure. They resist our attempts to domesticate them. We can never hope to master ideas as we can facts or techniques. We can, however, learn to move among ideas, to balance one against the other, to negotiate relationships between ideas, to accommodate new arguments. Ideas resist our attempts



to capture and contain them and thereby protect ourselves. They are always drawing us out again, into the dialogue, back into the conversation. It is in the discussion sections, then, that we will have the best opportunity to exchange ideas and to see where they lead us.

III.

We have talked now about the lectures and the discussion sections,

how they each contribute to the joy of reading, the participation in dialogue, the development of ideas, and the general exercising with words that is central to a liberal education. But what about the end product, writing? If reading and discussion are likened to exercising, writing is the game itself.

When we write, we practice moving among ideas with more independence and responsibility. Writing makes word exercise less spontaneous, more systematic and rigorous. And it remains perhaps the best method we have of practicing the difficult but necessary task of turning opinions into ideas. Writing forces us to clarify our thoughts. Since every word in an essay can be retrieved (unlike the words in an oral conversation), and then discussed, interpreted, challenged, and even argued about, the act of putting words on paper is—or should be—more deliberate and more difficult than speaking. Writing, like living as a responsible adult, burdens us with greater consequences for our actions and our errors. I'm talking here about mistakes in meaning that can create the wrong impression and suggest a position or imply a claim that the writer does not actually intend to make. Written words can 'be thrown back in our faces'—by our readers or even by the page itself as we re-read our own words. Thus, writing makes us much more aware that every word we use is a choice, a choice that commits us to one meaning, one idea, even one way of life, and not another.

If we are going to be true to ourselves then, the selves that we are becoming through our writing, we must be intellectually and ethically responsible for the final version of our papers. Ideas cannot be copyrighted, but words can be. Your ideas should carry your particular accent; they should represent a commitment, your own personal struggle to say intelligibly what you think and believe. For that is what good writing should be: a reflection, a representation of the human being who is literally uttering, or 'outring,' a part or version of him- or her-self.

One of the reasons writers are tempted to take shortcuts, to copy and to plagiarize, is that writing is just plain hard. It is difficult to commit, and writing is all about commitment, of saying this not that, this way not that way. Wanting to say everything, we are often unable to say anything. This quandary is nothing other than a version of writer's block. The best solution to the circumstance of writer's block is to discover a stance within the circumstance. We would do well to follow Wayne Booth and call this a rhetorical stance. A rhetorical stance comes about when something begins to matter to you. When that happens, you will very likely have the urge to communicate, to express yourself, to share your thoughts and insights with your peers.

My rhetorical stance today has been to impress upon you the importance of joining the Great Conversation. I will not worry if my lecture is the very best thing I could have said this morning. I am happy that I found something to say, something that I believe and care about. We should all be so lucky: to find events and people, thoughts and ideas, that we care about, and to enjoy the pleasure of conversing our way through the human situation. That conversation may be our most durable pleasure and our greatest virtue as human beings.

One lesson, then, of this imperfect lecture, is that we mustn't demand too much of ourselves. It has been said that the good is the enemy of the best. Catchphrases such as this are usually uttered by those who are exhorting others—or themselves—to do more, to work harder, to be dissatisfied

with who they are and with the work they have done. The most terrible responsibility that a teacher can place on a student is this sort of dreadful assignment: "It doesn't matter how long your paper is. Just make it as long as necessary. And I don't care when you turn it in; just be sure that this paper is truly the best work that you are capable of. And it must be thoughtful, creative, and original."

For our purposes, the best, if demanded too sternly, will prove to be the enemy of the good. The kinder, gentler assignment is the one that reduces the pressure to be perfect by increasing the pressure to be on time: "Do the best job that you possibly can—by Thursday."

My remarks today have been highly imitative, scarcely original, and almost wholly derivative of other writers, other participants in the Great Conversation. I urge you to learn

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**Do the best job that you possibly can
—by Thursday.**

from others as well. Do not assume the stance of a Delphic oracle, refusing to inhabit the common places, the public haunts, where we all must meet for the sake of conversation. Depend on the various texts that we share and will learn to share better, depend on me as I will strive to depend on you, and comingle your insights and motives with others participating in our conversation. One of our recent guest speakers, Professor William F. May, told us that one of his great mentors, Paul Ramsey, used to say that all he ever tried to do with his distinguished professional life, his teaching and writing, was keep up his end of the conversation. That, I think, is the best that any of us should expect from one another or ask of ourselves.

PROTEUS IN THE HONORS COLLEGE

We are celebrating forty years—the first forty years—of the Human Situation, the flagship class of the Honors College. In fact, such is the longevity of the course that it predates the College itself by some sixteen years. Honors was a mere stripling of a program when Founding Dean Ted Estess and Dr. Stephen Langfur launched Human Sit, as it soon became known, in the spring of 1977. An account of the thousands of students who have enrolled in the course since then would be a Homeric catalogue indeed.

But are students who sign up for Human Sit today taking the same class that was offered back in '77? So much has changed. Instead of a small band of instructors, Human Sit is now staffed by more than twenty professors, and they teach hundreds, not dozens of students. The size of the operation has necessitated the split, with attendant good-natured rivalry, into the Alpha and Omega teams. Then again, if pioneers from the first class came back to audit the contemporary course, they'd recognize some of the great books under discussion, and they might very well have Dr. Estess again as their discussion leader.

This creative tension within the Human Situation enterprise between sameness and change puts me in mind of a podcast I heard recently. It was a BBC radio show about cultural landmarks, and featured a panel discussion on the enduring influence of that Human Sit perennial, Homer's *Odyssey*. One of the guests was of particular note: Dr. Emily Wilson, whose newly published translation of the epic has been getting a lot of attention and acclaim, not least because she's the first woman on record to render the complete poem into English.

Asked to explain that enduring appeal, Dr. Wilson said this: "I think it still matters because it speaks to big human questions. Like, "Who are you?" And "Can you be the same person over time? Can Odysseus be the same person that he was twenty years ago?"

So, can Human Sit be the same course that it was forty years ago? Well, I know this. It's still asking the "big human questions." In recent years, the teams have tackled themes ranging from self and soul to visions and visionaries, from liberty to love. And the students engaging with these classic questions and those classic texts (along with new questions, new classics) are still asking big questions of themselves. Like, "Who am I?"



By Robert Cremins
Irish Novelist
The Honors College

Those of us who teach the Human Situation course understand that "engineering major" or "pre-med student," while significant in terms of identity and vocation, are not sufficient answers to that question. We strive to make a contribution to the formation of the individual. That ideal has not changed.

In this way, Human Sit plays its part in the College's overall mission of "success that lasts a lifetime." For us, that involves a lifetime of learning, of imagining, of reflecting. I myself like to imagine a reunion of the class currently taking Human Situation, say, twenty years from now.

Back on the Ithaca of their education, the UH campus, alumni ask themselves, "Am I the same person who sat in that lecture hall taking notes on Othello? The same person who wrestled with the complexities of Gorgias in discussion class? Who went to the Writing Fellows when I was struggling with that paper on Austen? Who later became a Writing Fellow myself? Who was so nervous before my oral final and then so surprised by how well it went?"

Perhaps the answer to any one of these questions will be the mixture of sameness and change that we find in the course itself. Perhaps growing older, like Human Sit, like the study of the great books in Human Sit, is an act of translation.

THE ILIAD



By Nancy Mangum McCaslin ('83)
Inaugural Year
Human Situation Student

When I think of Harold Bloom's list of Great Books and the Honors College (or Honors Program, as we were in my day), I asked a simple question: "Which book have you read repeatedly in the course of the intervening 40 years since Human Sit began?" The answer was clear: Homer's *Iliad*.

I home educated my four children and required it for them, along with the many other home-educated students who attended my Classical Lit seminars in co-ops or the high school years.

I confessed to Ted at the Human Situation 25th celebration that I started using my Human Sit notes (from 1978, the first year of the course) as a basis for my syllabus (always giving credit, of course). Since, unfortunately, war never loses its relevance, the *Iliad* retains its significance. Are we not still moved by the foreshadowing of Hektor's death when he, in his role as father, sets down his shiny helmet in the dust for love of his son? Are we not amazed that two opponents in war bend to the higher duty of hospitality (philoxenia)?

Are we not unfazed, immersed in our culture of violence, by the brutality of war and the distance we've artificially created with our precision-guided, high-tech, once-removed weapons and their 'collateral damage'? And, are we not surprised by the plight of women in war, an all too familiar constant?

Somehow, when returning to the *Iliad*, I always make the association with another book about war and its effects, which prompts a rereading of Vera Brittain's thick *Testament of Youth*. And we march forward but back again.

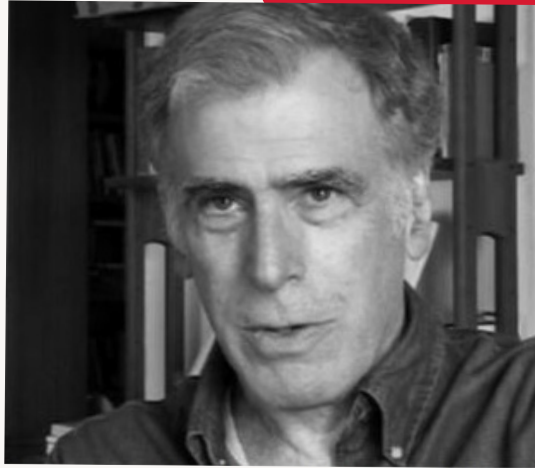


THE ODYSSEY

By Stephen Langfur
Co-Creator of The Human Situation
Course; Instructor 1977-1979

The *Odyssey* is my pick. It works on at least two levels. On the one hand, we have the story—those adventures!—and, on the other hand, there is something else going on, something deeply engaging. I think of it in terms of initiation into manhood (for, yes, the gender factor is strong).

There is Odysseus, who went through initiation in his youth and thus became the hero that he ever again proves himself to be. The mark of his initiation is the scar on his thigh, received from a wild boar during a hunt: he faced the danger of castration and prevailed. (When he arrives on his home island in disguise after an absence of 20 years, it is by this scar that his old nurse recognizes him while washing his feet.)

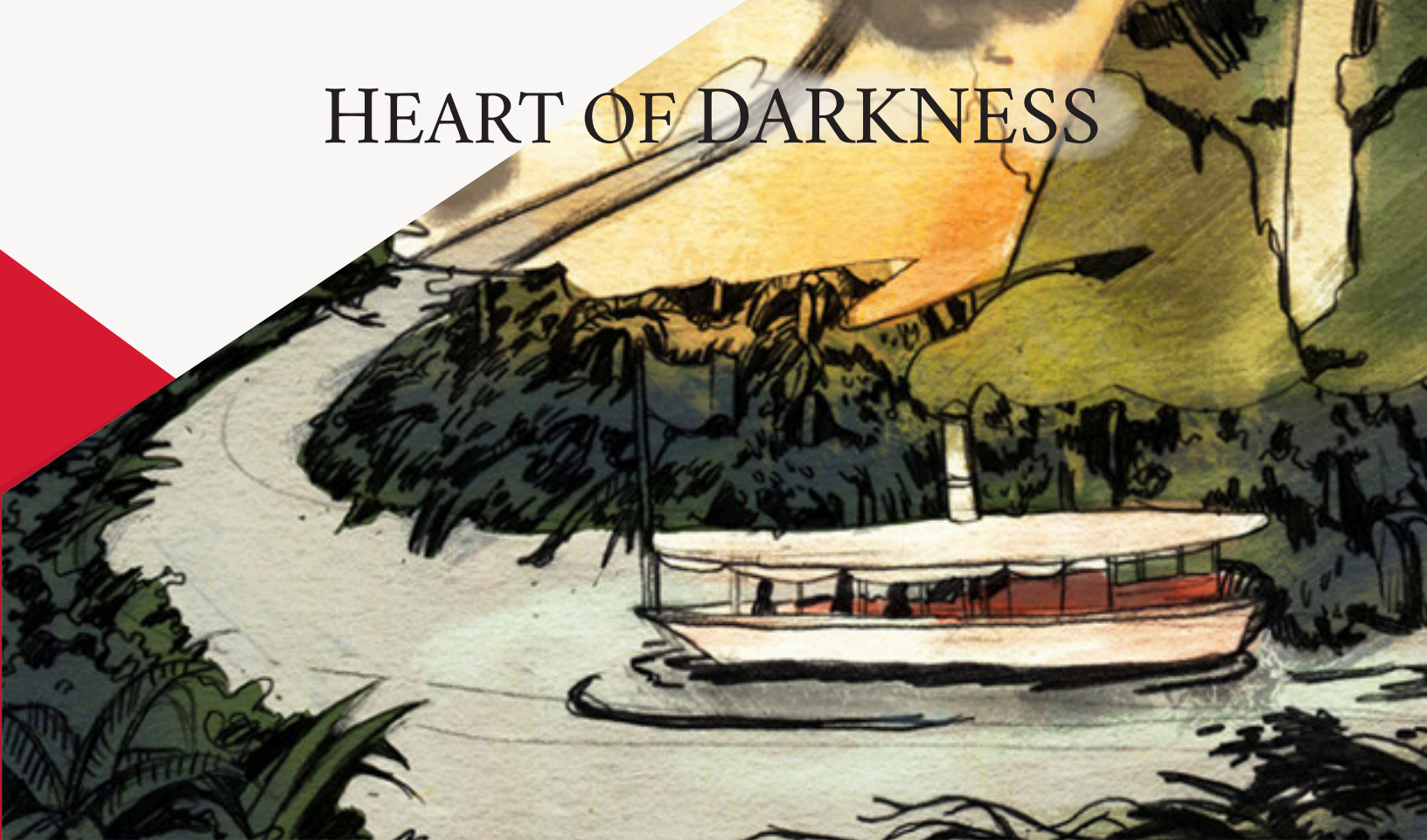


And there is Odysseus' son, Telemachus, whose initiation is being built up throughout the poem. At the start, his absent father's palace is usurped by a crowd of carousing suitors who, proclaiming Odysseus dead, want to marry his mother and seize the estate. (I think of these suitors as the wild impulses raging in every son.) The initiation of Telemachus requires a confrontation with the suitors. Feeling overwhelmed, he goes in search of his dad. Learning he is alive, he then returns home.

Meanwhile, with the help of the gods, Odysseus arrives disguised as a beggar and lets his son in on the secret. Odysseus' wife, Penelope, suspecting who the beggar is, sets a task: whoever can string the great bow of Odysseus and shoot an arrow through a row of axes will have her as wife. Telemachus tries and 'would have strung it,' but his father dissuades him. (Must I spell out the psychology?!) The suitors fail to string it, and then father and son team up to slay them.



HEART OF DARKNESS



By DeMointé Wesley ('17)
Former Human Situation Writing Fellow
and Team Omega Teaching Assistant

which I still agree). Needless to say, I had my reservations about reading it, and initially tried to fight any discussion about the book that treated it as serious literature.

I soon found, that to do the work that was required of me by the Human Situation, I would have to put my preconceived opinions and discomfort with *Heart of Darkness* on a shelf—not to be abandoned, but to be revisited later. *Heart of Darkness* taught me that oftentimes the most fruitful readings come not from reading against the grain of the text, but with it. I learned, to paraphrase one of my Human Situation professors, that oftentimes if you look closely enough, a written work will teach you how to read it.

I learned to read the text on its own terms, to use the logic presented by the text itself to understand its implications and map its contours. I eventually arrived at a convincing interpretation of the novella and wrote an essay on it, which went on to win the Best Human Situation Essay Award.

In this vein, *Heart of Darkness* taught me that not liking or agreeing with the logic of a text should not impede one from reading and interpreting that text. This lesson has been important to me throughout my career as a student of literature.



H *Heart of Darkness* means a great deal to me because it taught me to be a better student of literature. I went into our reading of the novella having already read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and his searing criticism of *Heart of Darkness* (criticism with

A DOLL'S HOUSE

By Nicole Mosley,
Human Situation Writing Fellow

Although Human Sit provided me with an opportunity to explore a variety of significant and enlightening texts, one of my favorites by far has been Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*. The story was particularly meaningful for me because it illuminated aspects of my personal life at the time, and ended up being a catalyst for significant personal growth.

I remember distinctly how my mindset shifted after reading about the courage that Nora exhibits at the end of the story. Her brave choice to leave behind something she had spent most of her life building and nurturing in pursuit of freedom fueled by her growing desire for independence was one that inspired me to approach my own life in the same way.

I think that reading this story pinpointed a pivotal moment in my story, one where I grew from a girl entering college starry-eyed and eager to learn, to a woman grounded in my own truth. This story encouraged me to become fearless in the pursuit of finding my voice and motivated me to stake my claim in the world and find my distinctive place in it.



THE MOVIEGOER

Christian Sarkar ('89)

O I worked in a movie theater during my first years at the Honors College, so that made me a Moviegoer. At least that's what I thought when I liberated the Walker Percy novel sitting on Dr. Estess' desk. I'd been hearing about Walker Percy from John "The Baptist" Hudson who was reading Percy's *Second Coming* in his "modernity" section of *Human Sit*. I wasn't in that section. The section I was in was something more like "Boredom and the Renaissance."

We were reading Pico, Valla, and Ficino. The big idea apparently was that we could choose reason, and use it as a lamp, to guide ourselves out of darkness in the world around us. What a novel idea—especially these days.

And so it was that I sat down to read *The Moviegoer*. The quote on the inside was the invitation: "...the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair" (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*).

As an engineering student, somehow I intuited that I too was suffering

from a type of despair, seeing as I spent most of my time avoiding my engineering classes as much as possible.

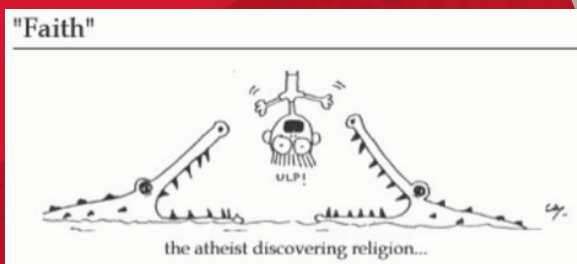
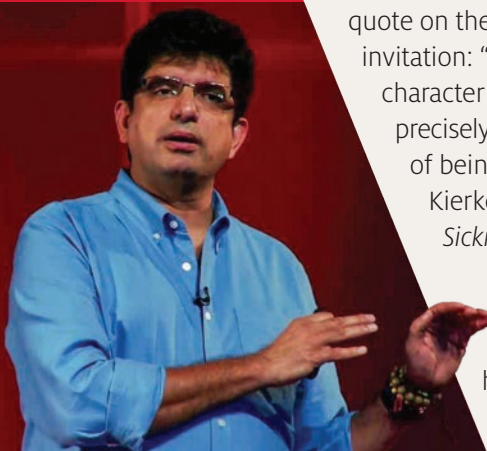
Anyway, *The Moviegoer* is about this lost soul, a gent by the name of Binx Bolling, who works in his uncle's brokerage firm, chases the secretaries, and is generally viewed by the matriarch of the fam as an utter failure of a human being. I identified with that last part. Binx reads *Consumer Reports* and lives a shallow existence watching movies with the secretaries at a movie theater in Gentilly. One morning Binx wakes up with the idea that everydayness isn't what it's cracked up to be. Maybe, just maybe there's more to life than simply watching movies and making money. Now he's on to something—the search. This was before Google, so the search, as defined by Percy, is "what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life."

Like Binx, I don't know what I'm searching for, but I do know that it's not engineering. I decide to do my own search. I end up reading everything Percy ever wrote. Turns out his first published work was a short story called "Carnival in Gentilly" in Donald Barthelme's *Forum*—printed at the University of Houston!

One evening, I write Percy a letter consisting of about six or seven cartoons. What I get back is a handwritten note in which Percy tells me he likes "The Atheist Discovering Religion."

Dr. Monroe will never believe this! Now I'm certified. Walker Percy knows me. I exist.

And so, in my final semester before graduation, I switch from electrical engineering to English literature. Thanks, Walker Percy. Now my life is all about rotations and repetitions. But that's another story.



DISCOVERING FIRE

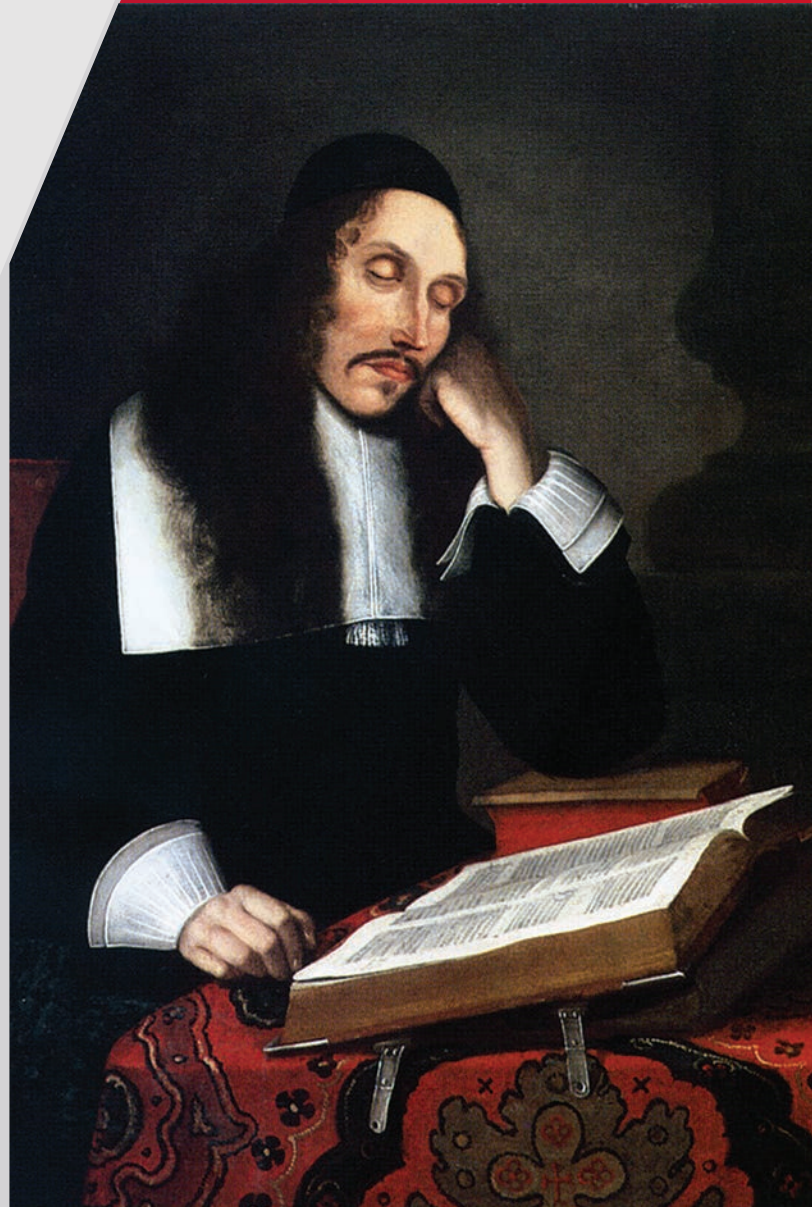


By Jesse Rainbow ('99)
Human Situation Instructor, 2012-Present

The first time I laid hands on Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* as a graduate student, I felt like I had discovered fire. On a park bench across the street from the bookstore where I purchased it, I read the book with bated breath from cover to cover in a single sitting, retracing the bold (and in 1677, earth-shattering) steps that would endure as some of the foundational insights of the modern academic study of the Bible.

Like Spinoza, I've been reading and hearing the stories of the Bible for most of my life: as a small child, as a graduate student specializing in the Hebrew Bible, and now as a faculty member in the Honors College. Reading Spinoza on that crisp fall day took me back to my own days as a freshman Human Situation student, when I first read the biblical book of Exodus and other ancient literature with the benefit of the critical and philological stance pioneered by early modern thinkers like Spinoza. Like so many others, I look back on Human Situation as a breakthrough in my capacity to read books—including the Bible—critically, deeply, and in conversation with others.

For me, the thrill of reading Spinoza's seminal treatise was as much about the archaeology of my own intellectual formation as it was a prophecy of the years of graduate study that still lay ahead of me at the time. In addition to numerous books of the Bible, we've assigned Spinoza twice since I've been teaching Human Situation. It still excites me. As a teacher, I get to pass on not only what I learned in Human Situation, but also what I learned because I took Human Situation.



A RITE-OF-PASSAGE

By Robert Cremins

The Human Situation course was transformational for Ysabelle Abraham ('16), especially the antiquity semester. She names the *Iliad* as a favorite among the Great Books. "It reminded me that the world is very small," she says, "and that even hundreds of years ago, there were the same kinds of themes and discussions regarding life and individual decisions and interpersonal relations that we still deal with today."

These were lessons that Abraham did not forget once she submitted the final Human Sit paper. They still form part of her critical-thinking skill set: "A lot of issues—philosophical, social, spiritual—were addressed, and I use them as a platform to build on and formulate my thoughts today."

Majoring in geology, Abraham graduated from the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics with a bachelor of science degree.

However, she took away from the University of Houston not only her diploma, but also the interdisciplinary approach she learned in the Honors College and its flagship class. Abraham is quick to point out that she is as likely to strike up a conversation about Caravaggio as she is about chemistry. She enjoys the challenge of "going beyond my major and what might be expected of me."



STUDENTS' FAVORITE HUMAN SITUATION BOOKS

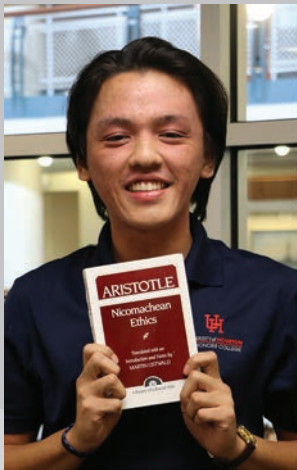


Morgan Biscoe

Senior
Industrial Engineering

Although I was not as interested in the writing side of the Human Situation course, I greatly enjoyed the open discussions with my peers and professors about the texts. This is one of many reasons I to return to the class as a Teaching Assistant during the spring 2018 semester.

Symposium by Plato



Rodolfo "RG" Yamba

Senior
Psychology/Liberal Studies

Human Sit was a very challenging course for me, but with persistence, and the help of my professor, I grew a lot from the course and definitely enjoyed taking it.

Nicomachean Ethics by Aristotle



Monica Marin

Senior
Industrial Engineering

Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* was a book of thought and ideas that helped me shape my own ideas of self-improvement. Throughout the Human Situation course, I grew as a writer and critical thinker with the help of great books and faculty.

Meditations by Marcus Aurelius



Katherine Corrigan

Senior
Management Information Systems

The Human Situation course is a class that gives you much more than a few semester's worth of credit. You end up using the analytical skills you develop in this class for the rest of your collegiate career!

Beowulf, Author Unknown

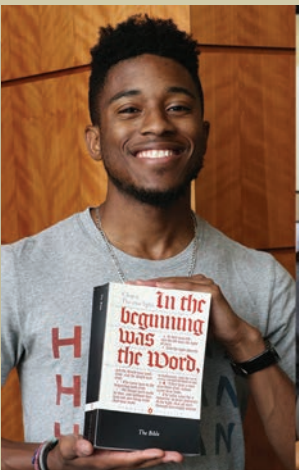


Konstatinos Vogiatzis

Junior
Accounting

My favorite thing about the Human Situation course was that during one lecture we could have a political science debate in one argument, and in the next lecture, a poet would completely debate that argument. We were given a diverse perspective of every reading!

The History of the Persian Wars by Herodotus



Malik Chambers ('18)

History

The most rewarding thing I learned from the Human Situation course—which became more and more relevant over the course of my college career—was how to believe in my own ideas and how to be accountable for what I say. Academic integrity is a big deal.

The Bible

ALL FIRED UP AND LEARNING

By Cynthia Freeland



My thoughts on the Human Situation course? Let loose, my imagination takes me back to the Golden Oldies days of the late 1980s, when everyone marveled at the densely crafted lectures on Homer or Dante delivered by Jack McNees and John Bernard. John once put on a dress in class to enact the scene from *The Bacchae* in which Pentheus dons women's clothes and minces about, preparing to sate his curiosity about what those wild Bacchantes were getting up to out in the mountains with goats. (You must picture a balding and bearded English professor in glasses to get the full picture of how hilarious this was.) Herb Rothschild always managed to tee everyone off—I'm sure deliberately—with explanations of why the creation story of Genesis was inconsistent because it was a historical document, not the literal Word of the Lord.

We were also treated to insights about the historical origins and interpretations of the Christian gospels from medievalist Michael Moore and religion and literature scholar Andrew Hass. And how can I forget the belly laughs evoked by John Scott's ad libs on Rousseau, or Professor Ross Lence's terrifying interrogations of any youth brave enough to speak up about Locke or Machiavelli?

Regrettably, some of the texts I suggested for use were not relished by my colleagues from English; I remember Ted Estess complaining about what a bad writer Charles Darwin was. But happily, other books I proposed were better received, including *The Arabian Nights* and *Death Comes to the Archbishop*.

My best lectures, I believe, were the ones I gave on Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which has remained a touchstone in my own philosophical work on the problem of evil. Her chilling account of the "banality of evil" is a topic with ongoing (and unfortunate) resonance.

I also remember becoming infamous for a week when a Muslim student denounced me in *The Daily Cougar's* letters column for screening a film scene of the "Liebestod" aria of Tristan und Isolde featuring full frontal nudity followed by suicide in a bathtub. This represented my (perhaps ill-judged) effort to convey what Nietzsche had in mind in speaking about Dionysian truths in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Surprisingly, the episode became a learning moment when



no fewer than five other students (including several Muslim women) wrote defenses of me to the newspaper, and I heard that students in all the discussion sections had eager debates about what my choice had meant or shown.

Because of the challenges of team teaching, there were some low points and struggles among the faculty members participating on the teams. One thing we all agreed upon was the sad quality of most of the written final exams. Spurred on by Dr. Lence, we initiated what has proven to be a far superior procedure—indeed, now a coming-of-age ritual—the Oral Final Exam.

The Human Situation course kept me coming back to participate over a period of four decades because of the wonderful moments of learning it afforded us all, faculty and students alike. It was in this course that I first read and/or came to understand and love Dante (yes, embarrassing to admit), Keats and Wordsworth, Plath and Akhmatova, Eliot and Beckett.

The teaching teams offered many terrific lectures: Rob Zaretsky on Thucydides, Gabriela Maya on Austen, Hayan Charara on James Baldwin, Bill Monroe on Flannery O'Connor, Tamler Sommers on Hume's *Essays* ("I love this book so much, I would marry it if I could"), Jonathan Zecher on Kierkegaard, Iain Morrison on Dostoevsky, Jesse Rainbow on Spinoza, Johanna Luttrell on Anzaldúa—the list could go on and on.

We were especially fortunate to be joined by many gifted younger scholars who opened up new texts to all of us. John Harvey helped us appreciate Martin McDonagh's savage humor in *The Pillowman*, and Stacy Peebles fearlessly guided us through the snake-filled waters of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.

When I first read that book right before the semester it was assigned, I said to myself, "There is no way we can teach this

book, and no way the students will actually read it.” But we did, and they did! I can’t remember a single moment of greater excitement in the classroom than the day the students had finished it and came pouring into our seminar room, asking, “WHAT HAPPENED THERE AT THE

END?” Such moments of imaginative engagement are priceless and rare. I may not remember each of my past students by name or face, but I value those times when the classroom came alive, with the students laughing or solemn, debating or listening—all fired up and learning.

MY HUMAN SITUATION

By Robert Zaretsky

Since the Human Situation opened for business in 1978, many thousands of Honors College students have not just survived the experience, but thrived as well. The Human Situation also continues to thrive—no small achievement in the age of STEM. For this reason alone, we ought to celebrate the 40th birthday of a remarkable course that embodies the mission of the Honors College.

But, to be honest, my thoughts are on a different anniversary. It was thirty years ago, when I was completing



my dissertation in Paris, that I received a letter from then-Associate Dean William Monroe. He invited me to apply for a teaching position in the then-Honors Program, which (I later discovered) was located in the bowels of Anderson Library at that time. Thrilled that someone other than a couple of archivists thought a Ph.D. in modern French history mattered, I made my

application. A few months later, when Honors offered the job, I gratefully accepted.

It turned out that I had no idea what I had accepted. The morning of my first lecture in the Human Situation, I had been assigned Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*—I felt a bit like the Athenians at Marathon as they marched toward the Persians. Not only had I never before lectured to fellow faculty—one of the invaluable quirks to the Human Situation—but I had never before lectured to students. I had never given a lecture, period. Moreover, until that same semester, I had never before read

Thucydides—or, for that matter, most anything prior to 1789—much less lectured on him.

I survived, barely. But did I thrive? Not at first. Instead, I worried—a lot. Worried that time spent on folks like Tacitus and Tocqueville, Montaigne and Mary Shelley, Herodotus and Hume, was time lost. Worried that The Human Situation would undo my professional situation as a specialist in 20th century French history. Worried that an obstacle course of seeming irrelevancies had suddenly been placed between my career goal and me. My worries were like the worries of the engineering and business majors in my classes: What did any of this have to do with preparing me for my profession?

Thirty years later, here’s the answer: The Human Situation did not make me a sharper specialist. But it did make me a better historian.

Herodotus’ remark about his account of the Persian Wars—that his endless digressions were his history—applied to my own work. The connecting of dots that stretch across centuries and straddle a dizzying array of literary and philosophical works still light up my writing. Thanks to the company of Plato and Plutarch, Beowulf and Beckett—not to mention brilliant colleagues and bright students—I still reconsider what I thought I knew and revise what I thought I had made clear. Each time I return to my earlier interests, I see them as if for the first time; each time I stumble across new interests, I find they are not, after all, all that new.

This, I believe, is the abiding importance of the Human Situation: it becomes, over time, every participant’s own human situation. We may not recall, forty years later, a particular passage from Virginia Woolf or couplet from Emily Dickinson; But we do know that were it not for what they wrote, we would not be who we are. Who knows: we might even reach for the dog-eared volume on a shelf to measure how we changed.



40
YEARS

**THE HUMAN
SITUATION
1977-2017**

A Fortieth Anniversary Celebration

Friday, November 3, 2017
The Honors College

5:30 P.M. RECEPTION

6:30 P.M. PROGRAM

Welcome

William Monroe

"In the Beginning"

Ted Estess

"Fanfare for Nobody"

John Grimmet

"The First Semester of Human Sit"

Martin Cominsky

"Medea and Me"

Tanya Fazal

**"From Student to Student: My Two
Careers in the Human Situation"**

Jesse Rainbow

**"Fifteen Years Teaching the Human
Situation"**

Iain Morrison

**Outstanding Human Situation
Essays, 2016-2017**

William Monroe



Martin Cominsky



FANFARE FOR NOBODY

Honors alum John Grimm (’11) was commissioned by the College to create a fanfare for the 40th anniversary of the Human Situation course. He is a composer, writer, and director, whose work has been performed internationally.

By John Grimm (’11)

All students in the Honors College at the University of Houston take a two-semester course called The Human Situation during their freshman year. In the first semester of the course,

entitled Antiquity, they begin the study of our cultural heritage by examining texts from the Greek, Roman, Hebrew, Christian, and Islamic cultures of antiquity. The modern world is deeply rooted in these cultures, and they were themselves inspired and shaped by Homer’s epic poems; by Platonic philosophy; and by the Hebrew Bible, The New Testament, and Qur’an.

These key texts, or ‘classics,’ present compelling, if not always harmonious, insights into human situations: the excellences proper to human beings; the character of the human soul; one’s relations to family, friends, lovers, strangers, and the gods or God. The greatest thinkers of antiquity concerned themselves with the elaboration, criticism, and reconciliation of these powerful insights, and in doing so they took up once again the intriguing question of how to live one’s life. The result of their efforts is a shared and open conversation concerning the most important matters for human beings.

In the second semester—entitled Modernity—students continue their study and interpretation of these cultural

traditions. Guided by careful readings of what others have written, they attempt to discover their own ideas and commitments by speaking and writing about these texts. Many topics naturally emerge as important to our reflection on the texts in the Modernity course, including topics like prophecy, liberty, virtue and the gods (or God), the journey within, self and soul, the laws and the Law.

I remember reading the opening lines of Stanley Lombardo’s translation of the *Iliad*, a single word permeating the blankness of a white sheet of paper: “Rage ...” At the beginning of my college career, I was hooked on the power of literature and the classics and the singularity of the human



spirit. Lombardo’s translation provided a living connection between a relic and a modern audience, and that’s how I’ve always perceived what I do: to make something out of nothing, to make something new again from something old.

I suppose the *Iliad* led to the *Odyssey*, and to this day, I am most taken by Odysseus’ trickery of Polyphemus, the vicious Cyclops who terrorized his men, holding them captive on a hillside. One night, after making Polyphemus drunk on wine, Odysseus and his men put a sharp point on the end of a pole and ram it through the Cyclops’ eye, blinding him. In agony,

Polyphemus screams to his fellows Cyclopes for help. "Whose fault is it?" They ask. "Nobody's," says Polyphemus.

Ultimately, Odysseus is able to escape to the sea where he tells Polyphemus he has Nobody to thank for his troubles. As a bright-eyed freshman student, one dreams of becoming

something in a sea of beginnings. The hope is that, through education and hard work, we can become a somebody instead of a nobody, a notion that is, perhaps, uniquely American in all of its ambition and its faults. But being nobody saved Odysseus' life — and reading about it has saved mine ...

Score

FANFARE FOR NOBODY

Commissioned by the University of Houston Honors College
in commemoration of forty years of "The Human Situation"

John Grimmett

Stately ♩ = 40

©2017

The musical score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes parts for Trumpet in B♭ 1, Trumpet in B♭ 2, Horn in F, Trombone, and Tuba. The second system includes parts for B♭ Tpt. 1, B♭ Tpt. 2, Horn, Trombone, and Tuba. The score is in 4/4 time with a tempo of Stately ♩ = 40. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The first system starts with a dynamic of *mp* for the trumpets and *mf* for the horns. The second system starts with a dynamic of *mf* for the trumpets. The score features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. There are also some triplet markings (3) in the trumpet parts.

*... I humbly dedicate this fanfare to Nobody,
whoever he or she may be,
the one who sits in the darkness.*

A DREAM COME TRUE

By Tanya Fazal ('03)

The Human Situation course was one of those life-changing courses that was so eye-opening, so illuminating, so fascinating that I still talk about it many years later.

At the core, Human Sit was a literature course—but it was much more than that. During my two semesters in Human Sit, I learned more than character development and exposition. I learned how to think critically. A skill so critical (ha), but so woefully missing from many people.



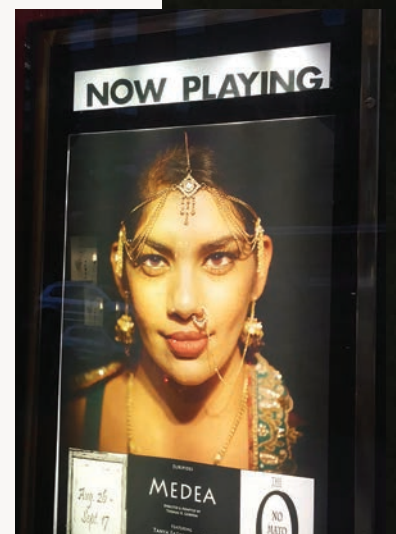
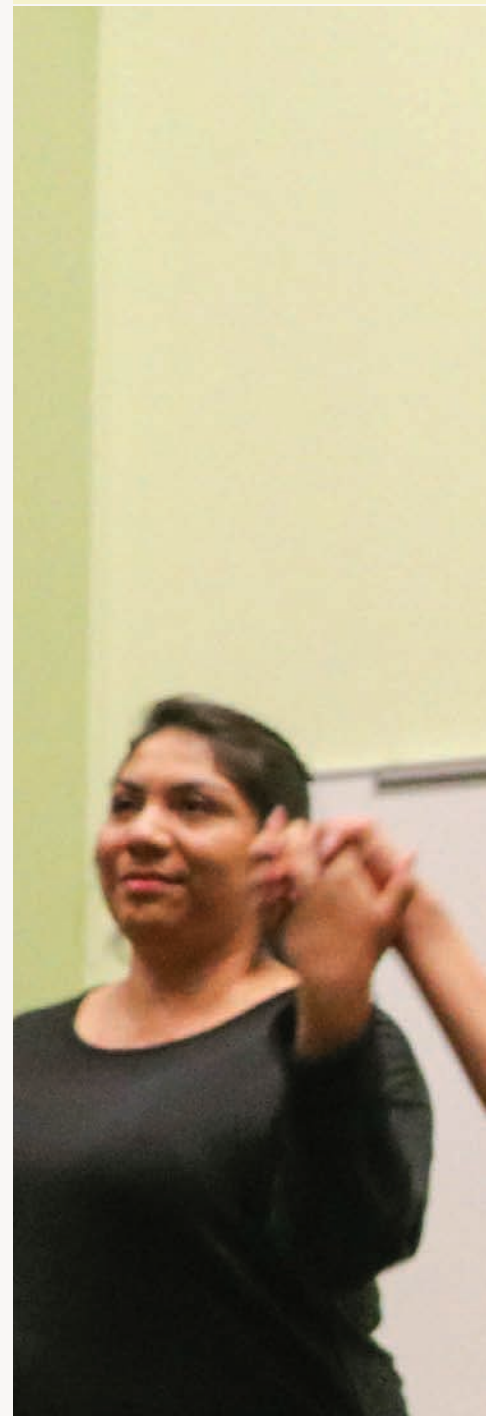
The professor for my Human Sit class was Dan Price. He was one of those teachers you look back at years later and realize that they significantly changed your life. He was passionate, interesting, and just a little mischievous. He taught me to challenge everything, ask questions, and always encourage and participate in discourse.

One text he taught in the Human Sit class was Euripides' *Medea*. I was completely enthralled by the central themes of betrayal, vengeance, and pride. I decided after reading the text that my lifelong dream was to play the role of Medea in a production in New York City. Many years later, that dream came true. When it did, I emailed Dan to let him know how much his class affected me.

He emailed me back right away. Not only did he congratulate me and suggest meeting for coffee the next time I was in Houston, he also looked through his records and found comments on the papers I turned in all those years ago and sent them to me. This gesture was significantly above and beyond the expectations of a past teacher.

The Honors College and Human Sit were much more than a college and a course to me. It was a place where I learned skills that would serve me in later years. A place that still keeps in touch with me and asks me to participate in activities. Truly, a place that's central to my adult life.

Thank you, Human Sit. Thank you, Honors College. And thank you, Dan Price.



MEDEA AT UH

Tanya Fazal holds an MBA from NYU Stern and currently works in New York as a marketing director at American Express. Her true passion lies in the theater, where she recently played her dream role of Medea in the Onomatopoeia Theatre Company's production of Euripides' *Medea* in New York.

In November, Fazal brought the show to the Honors College at the Grand Challenges Forum, and spoke at the 40th Human Situation anniversary event in the Honors College Commons.



THE HUMAN SITUATION

by Iain Morrison
Human Situation Instructor

As a philosopher, my impulse in talking about the Human Situation on its 40th anniversary is to ask a basic question: what is the primary function or purpose of the course? What is the Human Situation for? Of course, depending on the student, there may be several ways of answering this question: some students learn to read with a more interpretive eye, some learn to write critically, etc.

But it is likely true that these kinds of skills could be acquired outside of a team-taught, two-semester grand tour of some of the great books of (mostly) Western Civilization.

And so, the question I am really asking is why we have our students read the books they read over their first year in college. Why introduce our students to Homer's story of stolen honor and consequent rage, Plato's three-part division of the soul, the biblical stories of fraternal strife and even fratricide, or Euripides' tale of a mother's vengeful murder of her own children? What are we doing to our students!

One way of answering this question—a way that I think gets to the heart of the matter—is to consider what our students experience in those small and quiet moments of success in the classroom or in their dorms as they read these books: what is happening in those moments when the students make meaningful contact with the ideas we are teaching?

In a recent semester, we were talking in discussion section about some of the intriguing passages from the first four books of the *Odyssey*. I was guiding my students in looking closely at the various elements of the following passage in

which Athena first visits (and we as readers first meet) Odysseus' son Telemachus:

*Telemachus spotted her first.
He was sitting with the suitors, nursing
His heart's sorrow, picturing in his mind
His noble father, imagining he had returned
And scattered the suitors, and that he himself,
Telemachus, was respected at last. (1. 121-26)*



Above all, I was trying to get the students into the palace courtyard with Telemachus by asking why Homer puts him sitting with the suitors. What is he feeling as he sits amongst older and more experienced men who want to marry his mother? Does Telemachus want to murder the people with whom he sits? What would that be like?

Later in the class, we turned to the passage in Book 4 in which Telemachus visits Menelaus' palace in search of news about his father. The dinner conversation turns to those lost in the war, and Helen—finding herself in an awkward spot since she effectively started the war—is not content to let the party wind down on a somber note:

*But Helen, child of Zeus, had other ideas.
She threw a drug into the wine bowl
They were drinking from, a drug
That stilled all pain, quieted all anger
And brought forgetfulness of every ill. (4. 231-35)*

As I drew the students' attention to the various elements of this passage and wondered about the relationships between those elements, one of my students put up his hand and tentatively asked whether the passage was hinting at a causal relationship between pain and anger. I encouraged him to go on. He suggested with increasing confidence that pain breeds anger, that it looks for someone to blame, someone to lash out at. And then he pointed out that the same juxtaposition of pain and anger is present in the Telemachus passage we had looked at earlier. In my view, it is little moments like this which point to the deepest purpose of the course.

As I listened to this student making a small but significant breakthrough, I recalled from the recent class introductions that—as young as he was—he had known more than his fair share of struggles in life. He may have had this thought about pain and anger before, but in finding it here in the *Odyssey* he recognized himself in the world constructed in one of the great books in history; he saw himself, perhaps for the first time, as part of a great human journey.

This is what the Human Situation course is for; at its heart it is a course designed to allow students the kind of self-understanding that comes through a nuanced understanding of the world as it is presented in great books.

Students enter the Honors College with so many of their experiences unprocessed. All of their formative experiences have already happened, but they have mostly happened without being understood: the death of loved ones, the failure of relationships, the pressure of excessively authoritative parents, religious doubts, experiences of moving and leaving friends behind, and so on. These are very often painful experiences for young people that go unmediated by a conscious understanding of what is happening, or of the effects of what is happening (the anger, the fears, all the things that develop out of buried pain).

When I was 15 years old my father got a call to say that my uncle—my mother's brother—had died of a heart attack while playing golf. He was 48 years old. My mother was driving

back from the country when the call came in, so my father had about an hour to prepare himself to deliver the news. My sisters whispered together solemnly. Not knowing what to think, feel, or say, I went upstairs to study. When my mother came in I heard hushed tones below, and then she let out a kind of howl or whine the likes of which I had never heard before. I sunk into my chair in despair and confusion; my level-headed, rock-solid mother had completely broken down in grief.

After Uncle Tony's funeral, we all gathered at my Aunt's big country house in the middle of Ireland. Several of us cousins—all young lads at the time—were put into one giant room. My group included the cousin whose father had died. We stayed up all night talking about tractors, and Gaelic football, and every manner of thing except my cousin's dead father.

We were all around 15 years old. I knew that something should be talked about, but I had no idea how to process what had happened. What could I say to my young cousin who had just seen his father die on the local golf course?

The point of the Human Situation is to provide, with the help of great books, a way for our young students to begin the life-long task of thinking, and feeling, carefully through just these kinds of matters, so that they may begin to know themselves more fully as complicated and vulnerable human beings.

40
YEARS



Jesse Rainbow



Iain Morrison



Each of the guests at the celebration received a commemorative mug, celebrating 40 years of the Human Situation, the Honors College's signature course.



Tanya Fazal



BOX OF BOOKS

At the Human Situation 40th anniversary celebration, the Honors College introduced the opportunity to make a \$500 donation for a Human Situation book scholarship available to incoming students beginning in the fall 2018 class.

Each book scholarship allows a freshman to buy “a box of books,” all the texts that she or he will need for the Human Situation sequence, Antiquity, and Modernity.

If you would like to help provide a “a box of books” to an Honors student, please contact Hannah Barker at hmbarker@central.uh.edu.



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The Honors College has been rated among the top 10 in the nation by *Public University Press*.



THE HUMAN SITUATION
A CELEBRATION
1977-2017

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