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Rome and America: A Course Description

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1981 SAT AND LATIN ACHIEVEMENT TEST RESULTS  
AND ENROLLMENT DATA

Figures recently released by the Educational Testing Service show another significant increase in the number of students sitting for the 1981 Latin Achievement Test (AT) nationally as well as an upturn in the mean score on that exam: the 2,114 examinees, a 16% increase over 1980 (1,823) and 35% over 1979 (1,570), scored a mean of 548, compared with 529 in 1980 and 524 in 1979. This continued growth of participation in the Latin AT program parallels the increase in high school Latin enrollments nationally, as reported by CAMWS and ACTFL (see *CJ*, 78.1 [October/November], 1981, 49-64, esp. 51; university Latin enrollments, it may be added, are also on the upswing for the first time in years, increasing by 2.6%, to 25,035, between 1977 and 1980, as reported in the 9 December 1981 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. 16: source for the *Chronicle's* data was a survey of 2,341 colleges and universities conducted in 1981 by the Modern Language Association).

The average on the Verbal section of the SAT for those students taking the Latin AT (558) was 134 points higher than the national average (424) and, once again, higher than the averages for students taking the AT in all other foreign languages (Spanish 497, French 540, German 538, Hebrew 544, Russian 518). Similarly the SAT Math average for the Latin AT examinees (585) was significantly higher than the national average (466) and higher than the average for students taking all other foreign language AT's except Russian (Spanish 536, French 566, German 581, Hebrew 572, Russian 595).

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ROME AND AMERICA: A COURSE DESCRIPTION

In 1974, Eastern Michigan University was awarded a large National Endowment for the Humanities grant to develop a Humanities Program consisting of interdisciplinary course alternatives to a (very) long-standing array of conventional required offerings. Eastern, like many institutions in the boom-times of the sixties, experienced tremendous growth, undergoing metamorphosis from a smallish State Normal College for the training of teachers to a 20,000-student, diversified "mega-university." Though the classics section of the Foreign Language department went by the boards as demand for high school Latin teachers dwindled and students clamored for "relevant" programs, the university did retain a rather elaborate set of Basic Studies courses required of all undergraduates, regardless of major. The new Humanities Program was designed to provide interesting and worthwhile options to the all too familiar Introduction to Literature, Western Civilization, Art Appreciation, Introduc-

tion to Philosophy, etc. The first course to be planned and offered, in Fall 1974, was "Rome and America: A Cultural Comparison." It has been taught each fall since then to maximum or nearly maximum enrollments—125 students. Intended to introduce the required humanities segment of the student's degree program, it is designed for, but not restricted to, freshmen. "Rome and America" is a double (i.e., six-credit-hour) course taught by a team composed of a classicist (hired for the purpose) and a specialist in modern American literature; it constitutes forty percent of the average fifteen hour load carried by a student in one semester. The 125 class members meet en masse for a one-hour lecture on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings and again, later on the same days, for an hour of discussion in smaller groups of twenty or so participants. Lecture responsibilities are shared by the two instructors and each leads nine hours of recitation a week (three twenty-student sections three times per week). Since these twelve contact hours are a full teaching load for the term, the teachers may devote all of their attentions to this one course.

The object of the course is to encourage in students the habit of assessing what is unique and what perennial in their society by comparing it with a culture remote in time from themselves. The simplest way to show how this is attempted is to set out below a syllabus for the course. It should be pointed out that not all the texts listed can be used in a given semester and that minor alterations have been introduced from year to year, though the principal themes have remained the same. Thus what follows is in fact a conflated syllabus.

The course counts for two literature course credits toward Basic Studies requirements and stresses the literary text both as work of art and as embodiment or critique of the values of the society in which it was produced. Each of the three parts listed occupies about a third of the term and centers on analysis of two ancient and two modern authors. If it does nothing else, the course provides a chance for students to read Virgil and Horace and Catullus and Petronius and Juvenal—something even advanced literature majors do not (in fact cannot) otherwise do at Eastern.

As for the allocation of class time: discussion sessions are almost entirely devoted to the fundamental task of looking at the reading materials and asking "what have we here?" Lectures, on the other hand, are wide-ranging, sometimes being given over to background information about the authors and genres under consideration, but most often directed to the sketching in of the historical setting of both societies.<sup>1</sup> A lecture exam on these factual matters follows each of the three course segments.

## Part I The People and their Origins; Satiric Views of the Societies

### Texts:

- Ancient: Horace, *Satires*, especially 1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 1.9, 1.10, 2.1, 2.6, & 2.7  
 Juvenal, especially *Satires* 1, 3, 6, & 10
- Modern: Philip Roth, the title story, "Defender of the Faith," "Eli, the Fanatic," and "Epstein" in the collection *Goodbye, Columbus*

<sup>1</sup>A course pack assembled specially for this course contains selected literary, historical, and archaeological materials, lecture illustrations, and a 500-item bibliography.

One of the following:

Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*

....., *Slaughterhouse Five*

....., *Cat's Cradle*

Max Apple, *The Oranging of America*

Lecture Topics:

- Demographics: growth of population by absorption and immigration
- The immigration experience, “melting pot” phenomena in both cultures, gains and losses involved
- Materialistic values as targets of satiric attack
- The claims of city versus country (or suburban) life
- Satire, the aims and tactics characteristic of ancient and modern practitioners

Part II Non-Satiric Views of the Societies: Major Statements

Texts:

Ancient: Virgil, *The Aeneid*

Horace, The Roman Odes

Modern: John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

Willa Cather, *My Antonia*

Lecture Topics:

- Augustus and his National Program: his resources as head of state
- American presidential power and its growth
- The genre of epic; importance of the quest story
- Roman military establishment
- The pioneer experience in the United States
- Displacement and migration in American history
- Westward movement
- The land and its significance in the national consciousness of both societies
- Roman religious experience before Christianity

Part III Manners and Mores

Texts:

Ancient: Catullus, Selected Poems, especially the Lesbia poems

Petronius, *The Satyricon*, especially the “Dinner”

Selections from Pliny and Martial

Modern: Two of the following:

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*

Joan Didion, *Play It As It Lays*

Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*

Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*

James Dickey, *Deliverance*

J. D. Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye*

Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

## Lecture Topics:

- Roman public and private entertainment
- Roman food
- Roman women
- Mystery cult and Christianity
- The nouveaux riches in both societies
- Romantic (and other) love
- Foreign attitudes toward both cultures
- Symptoms of decline and fall; decadence

The key to the success of the course lies in the *gradual emergence* of analogues—they need not and should not be forced. Though very specific one-to-one parallels exist and are noticed in due course, it is the persistence of certain master themes and distinctive character types in the literature that makes the cultural comparison compelling. To cite only a few of the more obvious parallels in the readings:

—Horace's boor turns up in Philip Roth's infuriatingly self-seeking and tricky Sheldon Grossbart in "Defender of the Faith."

—The stereotypically hapless adulterers in Horace, *Sat.* 1.2, have a more complex modern manifestation in Roth's Lou Epstein.

—Juvenal and Vonnegut both unrelentingly expose injustice and human suffering occasioned by such things as the inequitable distribution of wealth in their societies; both claim a (in Vonnegut's phrase) "canary in the coal mine" function for satire.

—The insularity induced by great wealth, its quality of (in Steinbeck's words) freezing the owner into "I" and cutting him off forever from the "We" is the message of Horace, *Sat.* 1.1 and of Juvenal 10, and underlies the unhappiness (and even the madness) of Vonnegut's lonely rich, for example, Billy Pilgrim or Dwayne Hoover. It also precipitates the break-up of Neil and Brenda in "Goodbye, Columbus."

—The new-rich Ben Patimkin in Roth and Petronius's Trimalchio are strikingly similar, even to their eccentric table manners and semi-literacy. And Trimalchio's affinities with Jay Gatsby are manifold. (Fitzgerald considered entitling the novel *Trimalchio at West Egg*, but wisely settled for an allusion at the beginning of chapter seven; how many of the novel's readers would have caught the reference in 1925, or in 1981?)

—The (often pathetically) money- and sex-obsessed characters in Petronius, with their fear of time and death, have modern descendants in Sinclair Lewis's restlessly acquisitive Babbitt and in the aimlessly driven figures in the novels of West and Didion. The latter inhabit a world of appearance and make-believe, institutionalized in Hollywood, as spiritually unnurturing as the show-piece joke-plates at the Cena Trimalchionis are nutritionally unsatisfying.

—The obligation of adults to construct a secure future for their children, whatever the cost to themselves, is a prominent theme in the *Aeneid* (cf. 4.234: "Ascanione pater Romanas inuidet arces?") as well as in *My Antonia*; the Shimerda family in the American novel emigrates to the United States not for

the good of its adult members but for that of the children: "America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls." So too, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Ruthie and Winfield make the trip with relatively little strain, but Granma and Grampa (and old Mr. Shimerda in *My Antonia*—"My papa sad for the old country. He not look good") die like Anchises, their lives part of the price of transplantation for the benefit of coming generations. One suspects that Aeneas too will neither long survive the loss of his roots (*Aen.* 1.265-66) nor regret that eventuality (*Aen.* 6.719-21).

—The unrequited intensity of Catullus' love for Lesbia has its equal in Gatsby's love for a modern married and aristocratic woman—Daisy Buchanan. Nick Carraway describes Gatsby as possessing "an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again." He might have found it in the poetry of Catullus. Gatsby, of course, does not survive to admit to himself the bitter truth, but Nick suspects "there must have been moments . . . when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams."

—The disadvantages of city life and its attendant problems and pressures are highlighted in Horace, *Sat.* 2.6 and, with stunning modernity, in Juvenal 3. And in Philip Roth's stories, the flight from the city (the Bronx and Newark) is an important element: as Neil Klugman observes, "It was, in fact, as though the hundred and eighty feet that the suburbs rose in altitude above Newark brought one closer to heaven. . ."

And so on, almost ad infinitum. These and other similarities do indeed arise naturally from the reading and discussion of the texts in juxtaposition with one another. Laid out baldly here, they present a rather scatter-shot effect, but during some ninety class meetings one can isolate and trace and refine such parallels through the sequence of ancient-modern comparisons and reinforce them by a nexus of links backward and forward in the semester. Students are assigned periodic written projects dealing with particular parallels between an ancient and a modern author; these serve as summation exercises after discussion has taken place or as discussion starters before analysis in class. By term's end, they are ready to compose a retrospective, synthesizing treatment of a prominent and recurrent topic, say, attitudes toward wealth, or love, or "success" in each culture and to support their conclusions with an impressive battery of textual evidence—evidence sifted and weighed during many recitation sessions.

Other enhancements of the course include: guest lectures by faculty from other departments on Roman art, the Graeco-Roman strain in American architecture (Vitruvius—Palladio—Jefferson, etc.), and the classics in revolutionary America. Lectures on Roman daily life and realia are enlivened by slide presentations of Pompeian materials and supplemented by museum trips (for example, to the "Pompeii AD 79" exhibit) or films (for example, Fellini's "free adaptation" of the *Satyricon*). It is crucial that a basic course meeting twice as frequently as a beginning student's other courses be kept from palling. This is partly ensured by the sharing of lecture duties between the two instructors but also by variations in the style of lecturing itself: instructors may debate a controversial topic (for example, the extent and nature of the propagandistic

element in the *Aeneid*) or conduct “interviews” with interesting ancient figures (for example, Pliny the Younger, chosen both for his amiable anecdotal liveliness and for his eyewitness account of the Vesuvius eruption). Occasional recorded materials can be useful; for example, recordings of Lenny Bruce and George Carlin and Bob Newhart can lend greater precision and immediacy to discriminations between the satiric and the merely comic in the analysis of literary texts. Television tapes are another source of material for discussions. Alistair Cooke’s PBS “America” series is especially rich in possibilities. For instance, his final episode, “The More Abundant Life,” concludes with the proposal that American society presents some symptoms of Roman decline and fall, as these were identified in Gibbon. Cooke cites, among others, mounting love of show and luxury, a widening gap between rich and poor, a developing numbness to vulgarity, violence, and the assault on the simplest human decencies. Shown near the end of the semester, this program prompts commentary that avoids facile generalizations and snap judgments by virtue of the many carefully conducted comparisons that have preceded during the term.

A course such as this is, naturally, an ambitious undertaking. But it has the advantage of flexibility and of attainable goals. Given a student whose appreciation of the relevance to his own life of historical study is minimal and whose interest in antiquity is often nil, one must, as a purveyor of the classics, start with the familiar, the demonstrably and palpably vital—that is, modern literature—and go on to show that ancient Roman literature is addressed to the confrontation of men and women with issues and problems quite similar to those given expression in our own literature. There is fostered in the student a kind of penchant for comparison and a sense that this is a special and very worthwhile quality of this particular course. “Rome and America” has been characterized by a very low drop rate and even, thanks to the special six-hour format, by the manifestation of an *esprit de corps*—rare indeed in a Basic Studies course.

All this is, I submit, more than could be achieved were the same students to take a three-hour course in Roman history (based on Sinnigen-Boak or whomever) or in Roman literature *pari passu* or in series with a discrete three-hour course in modern American history or literature. More systematic and detailed study of the classics is likelier to occur after a cogent and enjoyable preliminary demonstration of the significance of such study.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Much of what is good about the course, both in its conception and its presentation, is due to Professor David Geherin of Eastern’s English Department.