

TRINITY WESTERN UNIVERSITY

ENGLISH 390RE: The Writings of Thomas Merton

Instructor: L. Szabo
Summer Semester, 2010
Credit: 3 s.h.

Office Hours: 12-1 daily
Location: Westminster Abbey
Mission, BC

PREREQUISITES: 9 s.h. of English and third or fourth year standing or instructor's consent

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The poet, monk, mystic, cultural critic and spiritual writer Thomas Merton remains as one of the most influential commentators and literary artists from the Christian perspective in twentieth-century America. Converted from agnosticism and liberal humanism to the vows of the Cistercian Order (the strictest observance in Catholicism) through a dramatic spiritual encounter while a graduate student at Columbia University in New York City, Thomas Merton, already a recognized poet, chose self-marginalization as his hermeneutical posture from which to study, engage, and subvert much of conventional literary, political, social, and religious hegemony. In his writings are embedded his profound commitment to the Incarnation at the heart of Christian orthodoxy and a poetics that calls for serious study and critique to search out its power and failures for those who would address his questions in a new century. By applying literary questions and analysis to his essays, poetry, drama, and autobiographical writings, students will be given the means to assess Merton's gifts and influence.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

1. To conduct a formal study of the literary themes and techniques of Merton's writings in the various genres.
2. To explore how Merton's writings are able to illuminate important questions about the nature and purpose of human existence, the quest for meaning, and the relation of human beings to the natural world and to the society in which they live.
3. To appreciate Merton's place in the development of American literature in the twentieth century and his ongoing significance as a writer of importance in that tradition
4. To encourage students to develop further their skills in thinking and writing about literature.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Coursepack for English 390 to be purchased from Trinity Western University Textbook Store.

Merton, T. *In the Dark Before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*. Selected and Ed.

Lynn R. Szabo. NY: New Directions, 2005.

---. *The Intimate Merton*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001.

---. *The Seven Storey Mountain*. New York. NY: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1999 [1948].

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1. One major paper of 3000 words will be required on one of the assigned essay topics. It must follow MLA guidelines for the preparation of essays about literature. **Students are given one month beyond the completion of the course in order to complete the essays. They will be due on Monday, June 21st by NOON. Mail to Paula Flink, Faculty Assistant, English Department, 7600 Glover Road, Langley, BC, V1Y 1Y1. Please include a return self-addressed stamped envelope in order for your paper to be returned to you. Ensure that there is enough postage to cover its mailing.**
2. Students will be expected to be familiar with the assigned readings prior to class and to help facilitate the discussion of the course texts and material from the reserve readings. Every student is required to present a set of reading notes on one or several of the poems in one of the sections of *In The Dark Before Dawn*. These must be handed in by noon on the last day of the retreat. These notes will be at least five pages in length.
3. There will be a comprehensive final examination on Friday afternoon, the last session of the retreat course..

PROPOSED COURSE OUTLINE:

Day 1: *The Seven Storey Mountain*: Merton's As Autobiographer

Day 2: The Early Poetry (1928-1949)

Day 3: "The Tower of Babel": Merton As Dramatist

Day 4: Merton As Diarist and Essayist

Day 5: The Later Poetry (1957-1968)

COURSE PROCEDURES AND GUIDELINES:

1. The course will be taught in a retreat setting which will combine studies of Merton as a literary figure with the experience of the monastic spirituality that informed his writerly conscience and gifts.
2. There will be a comprehensive final exam on the last afternoon of the course.
3. Consistent and punctual attendance is expected and required as is participation in retreat activities.

COURSE EVALUATION:

Reading Notes	15%
Research essay	45%
Final Examination	30%
Retreat/Participation	10%
TOTAL:	100%