

CL 9501A: Fall 2019

Fundamentals of Comparative Literature I:
Modes of Comparison



Fall Term 2019: Mondays 1:30pm-4:20pm
Room: Pride Library [Weldon, rm 107]

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1. Course Description

“All reason, all imagination, operate subjectively, and pass from man to man objectively, by aid of comparisons and differences,” argued H. M. Posnett in his pioneering work *Comparative Literature* (1886). Though his Victorian idiom strikes modern ears as gratingly sexist, his main point still rings true: “The most colourless proposition of the logician is either the assertion of a comparison, A is B, or the denial of a comparison, A is not B...But not only the colourless propositions of logic, even the highest and most brilliant flights of oratorical eloquence or poetic fancy are sustained by this rudimentary structure of comparison and difference, the primary scaffolding, as we may call it, of human thought.”

With the architectural metaphor of scaffolding, Posnett asserts the supportive importance of the concepts of “comparison and difference” in the rational construction of thought and the imaginative design of literature. Even though Posnett evidently confused the specific relation of identity ($A=B$) with comparison, and negation ($A\neq B$) with difference, his basic observation that comparative thinking is *foundational* to the study of literature is worthy of serious consideration. Not only does his work provide an encouraging anticipation of the tumultuous development of the discipline of Comparative Literature from the late nineteenth century to our own day; but it also serves as a clarion call for students entering the field to focus critical attention on the diverse modes of comparison as a first step in engaging with the ongoing debates and expanding horizons of the field.

In this half-course, we shall explore the logic (and sometimes the illogic) behind seven major modes of literary comparison: (1) typological comparison between parallel narratives; (2) interarts comparison between literature and painting/sculpture; (3) philological comparison between national literatures; (4) anthropological comparison between various geographically or sociologically binarized literatures; (5) rhetorical comparison between rival representations of reality; (6) taxonomic comparison between hierarchized genres; and (7) dialectical comparison between politically defined literary movements. In the process we shall study the origins and development of the field of Comparative Literature from the early 1800s to the late 1960s. Special attention will be paid to one influential classic in the field (Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, 1946) and to one influential theorization of comparison (Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition*, 1968).

NOTE: CL 9501A is a required course for Master’s students in Comparative Literature.

2. Assignments / Grade Breakdown

1. Midterm [take-home question, 10pp. Essay].....	30%
2. Presentation [scheduled in weeks 4-13].....	20%
3. Essay [20 pp.].....	50%



3. Schedule of Readings

SEPTEMBER

Week One

Sept 9 → Typological Comparison

Reading: Dante, *Purgatorio* 10 [handout: we'll read it together in class]

Week Two

Sept 16 → Interarts Comparison

Reading: Lessing, *Laocoön*

Week Three

Sept 23 → Philological / National Comparison

Reading: *Sourcebook*: essays by Herder, de Staël, Goethe & Eckermann, Nietzsche

OCTOBER

Week Four

Sept 30 → Cross-Cultural Comparison

Reading: *Sourcebook*: essays by Meltzl, Posnett, Brandes, Gayley

Week Five

Oct 7 → Rhetorical Comparison #1

Reading: *Mimesis*: chapters 1-10

[Week Six: Thanksgiving]

Oct 14 → No class

Week Seven

Oct 21 → Rhetorical Comparison #2

Reading: *Mimesis*: chapters 11-20.

Midterm distributed [take-home essay question: 10 pp.]

Week Eight

Oct 28 → Taxonomic Comparison #1

Reading: *Sourcebook*: essays by Lukács, Bakhtin

Midterm answer submitted

NOVEMBER

[Week Nine: Fall Reading Week]

Nov 4 → No class

Week Ten

Nov 11 → Taxonomic Comparison #2

Reading: *Anatomy of Criticism* [Fourth Essay]

Week Eleven

Nov 18 → Dialectical Comparison

Reading: *Sourcebook*: essays by Hideo, Paz, Adorno

Screening: Buñuel, *Los Olvidados*

Week Twelve

Nov 25 → Theorizing Comparison

Reading: Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* [Introduction + chapter 1]

DECEMBER

Week Thirteen

Dec 2 → Shifting Grounds of Comparison

Reading: *Sourcebook*: essays by Wellek, Sontag



4. Required Readings

- a. *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*. Ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- b. Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- c. Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
- d. Northrop Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Fourth Essay: "Theory of Genres." [online: Western Libraries]
- e. Gotthold Lessing. *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Trans. McCormick. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.
[also online: <https://archive.org/details/laocoonesayupon00lessingrich>]
- f. Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation." [essay available online].