

Course Proposal

Details

- a. Course Title: Science Fiction as a Gateway to Human Diversity
- b. Sponsors: Michael Grove, Department of Biological Sciences
Roberto Madero, Department of Foreign Languages
- c. Credit Hours: three
- d. Course Level: First –year undergraduate
- e. Curricular effect: This will serve as an interdisciplinary Rowan Seminar course
- f. Prerequisites: none
- g. Implementation: Fall 2005
- h. Resources: Present faculty and library resources are adequate.

Rationale

This interdisciplinary course is designed to meet the Rowan Seminar series goal of addressing diversity and democracy issues. The course will utilize scientific, historical and literary techniques to introduce freshmen to key concepts of diversity and democracy with which our current society continues to struggle. Students will be introduced to these concepts via an exploration of science fiction literature. Given the history of science fiction explorations of dystopian and utopian societies and the current popularity of the science fiction/fantasy genre, this course should represent a unique opportunity and method for increasing student awareness and understanding of the critical issues of diversity and democracy.

Essence of the Course

- a. Objectives: This course is intended to:
 - provide students with an understanding of the importance and uses of science in creating a diverse and democratic society.
 - increase student awareness of how science may be used to justify discrimination.
 - allow students to see how literature (particularly fictional literature) can inform our knowledge of diversity and democracy issues.
 - provide a perspective on how the uses of science and literature have changed historically.

- promote the recognition by students of current social diversity and discrimination issues.
- train students in effectively transitioning between hypothetical and abstract thinking about social issues to real-world applications.
- increase critical thinking and synthesis skills.
- introduce students to the rules of literary genres (particularly science fiction).

b. Topical Outline / Content

The course will be divided into three sections of approximately equal length:

- Introduction

In this initial series of discussions, the students will explore how knowledge is often construed as a legitimization of power and how science is currently viewed as the “proper” means for gaining knowledge and thereby, power. The students will then be forced to confront ways in which scientific theories can be or have historically been misapplied to justify racial, gender, or economic discrimination. We will discuss how science is ideally believed to be objective and value-free but, of necessity, intimately interacts with societal beliefs and pressures in its everyday practice.

Science fiction as a genre will then be explored, particularly in a historical perspective. The genre will be seen to have its origins in Utopian fiction, which had the dual goals of criticizing current society and exploring alternative future histories. The degree to which current science fiction plays a similar role will be discussed.

Finally, we will explore how contemporary advances in science have historically informed science fiction. By briefly tracing the progress of scientific advances in Darwinian natural selection or genetics, for example, students will see how science, science fiction, and society have developed in parallel.

- Science fiction and dystopia

In this set of readings, the critical role of science fiction in criticizing the use of scientific and technological progress to justify discrimination will be addressed. Novels such as H.G. Wells *The Time Machine* or Phillip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* can be used to illustrate how evolution or genetic manipulation might serve as a pretext for various forms of racism, sexism, or class discrimination. By presenting the topics in an initially hypothetical context, students can begin to explore in a less threatening way how their own beliefs in science as a body of knowledge may lead to conscious or subconscious discrimination.

- Science fiction and utopia

These readings will address the interaction of science fiction and diversity from an opposite perspective, namely: can the application of scientific principles lead to a utopian future in which discrimination is lessened or eliminated? There is a rich tradition of science fiction literature in which alterations in societal conceptions of biological

based concepts such as gender or race leads to a more just and equitable society. Such literature is exemplified by novels such as Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* or Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Sower*.

Potential Course Readings:

Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower*

Phillip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Robert Heinlein, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*

Frank Herbert, *Dune*

Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars*

Joan Slonczewski, *A Door into Ocean*

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*

c. Evaluation and grading procedures

The students will be evaluated in several ways over the course of the semester:

- Evidence of preparation for and participation in discussion
- A series of short reaction papers to each reading including a brief summary of major plot elements and an analysis of their relevance to current diversity issues
- 2 student-authored science fiction short stories addressing discrimination, one in a dystopian context and one in a utopian context
- Presentation to the class of one science fiction novel or short story dealing with themes of equality and diversity not already assigned
- A final essay exam in which the students will be asked to synthesize the readings for the semester and explain their view of how science, science fiction, and diversity issues inform each other.

d. Course evaluation

The course will be evaluated as part of the regular Rowan Seminar curricular review process.

Catalogue Description

Science Fiction as a Gateway to Human Diversity

Prerequisites: none

This course will explore the intersection between the ways in which scientific theories (especially evolutionary and genetic ones) are used to justify or reduce discrimination in human societies and the hypothetical exploration of similar issues in science fiction literature. Students will critically examine examples of utopian and dystopian science fiction and investigate how such writings can inform our thinking about current, real-world diversity issues.