



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

SYLLABUS DEL CORSO

Letterature Compare

2627-2-F0102R020

Course title

Observation, Understanding, and Narration in Primo Levi

In the introductory sessions, we will explore the anthropological foundations of literature, its possible origins, and its various functions, in dialogue with studies on human evolution and with literary theory. We will also examine the main fields of inquiry and methodological approaches of comparative literature.

The monographic section will be devoted to selected works by Primo Levi, focusing on his anthropological and ethological perspective, namely his distinctive ability to observe and interpret the behaviour of human beings (and other animals) in both everyday life and extreme situations. His centaur-like intellectual versatility will provide the starting point for exploring key issues such as the relationships between the humanities, the sciences, and technical disciplines; the connections between memory, testimony, and invention; the complexity of communicative processes and languages; and the profound ambivalences of work, experimentation, and hybridity. Throughout his rich and often surprising work runs a nuanced exploration of what it means to be human—of the dangers, limitations, and potential that define us—as well as a bitter awareness of the world's structural flaws, tempered by irony and an inexhaustible determination to repair at least a few of its joints.

Topics and course structure

An approach to the study of literature understood as cultural criticism (criticism of culture(s)), without predetermined linguistic or chronological boundaries. The analysis and interpretation of texts, themes, poetics is intended to contribute to reflection on the relationship between words and things, reality and discourse, words and power, socio-historical conditions and symbolic forms.

The main focus of the course is an approach to texts that highlights the importance of literature in cultural dynamics. This is done in different ways.

1. On the thematic level, the topics chosen by literary representation: moral values, interpersonal relationships, social roles, norms and transgressions, with a focus on the different declinations of similar

themes, situations, characters within different literary cultures.

2. On the aesthetic level, the emphasis of the ability to simulate experiences and propose models of meaning, and thus as an exceptionally broad and diverse repertoire of human models and destinies, i.e. psychological constellations, paradigms of behaviour, social and cultural contexts.
3. At the linguistic level, attention to the ways in which subjects (narrators, characters, poetic voices) speak about themselves and others, about internal and external events, private and public matters, facts and ideas; the recognition of the different communicative contexts represented, of the appropriateness and effectiveness of the expressive choices made by the interlocutors, of the existential and social significance of the different verbal interactions.

Objectives

The teaching objective is to promote and consolidate the ability to read, understand and re-elaborate texts, also in relation to different cultural contexts and to intercultural dynamics. Through the exercise of interpretation the student will learn to grasp the formal and thematic aspects of the works, the characters of the experiences represented, their organisation; and at the same time to question the relative motivations and implications. In addition, they will have the opportunity to delve into issues of great importance, which are the subject of the literary works tackled from time to time: be they historical events, psychological issues, moral problems, relational and communicative situations.

Through the exercise of interpreting literary texts, students will learn to gauge the depth and complexity of the universe of discourse and the dynamics underlying the work, and thus appreciate the potential of a conscious use of the word. In this way, they will be able to corroborate both their communicative skills and their autonomy of judgement. A conscious and trained ability to read enables one to transform aesthetic experience into a way of extending one's own existential experience, improving and refining one's understanding of discourse, choices, and the point of view of one's fellow human beings. Ultimately, literature is a tool that aims to increase the flexibility and pliability of responses (emotional, intellectual, pragmatic) to new situations: and, consequently, to intensify social interaction skills.

This teaching is intended to promote familiarity with the forms and languages of literature, and the ability to appreciate its semantic richness, cultural poignancy and intrinsic dynamism. Furthermore, it is intended to corroborate the ability to apply the acquired knowledge both to the interpretation of different cultural contexts and to the related possibilities of communication, dialogue and intervention. In general, it is intended to develop the skills of analysis and synthesis, as a part of a critical approach to cultural situations and phenomena.

Methodologies

The course consists of 19 three-hour lectures, which are normally delivered in person. Throughout the course, ample opportunities will be provided for discussion and interaction. Students will be actively involved in defining key concepts and categories (beginning with the notion of "literature"), interpreting literary texts, and exploring the relationship between literary theory and anthropological reflection. The language of instruction is Italian.

Online and offline teaching materials

Some critical texts, supplementary materials and resources for further study of the topics covered will be provided on the course's e-learning platform. Attending and non-attending students are strongly encouraged to register.

Programme and references

Institutional Part

Mario Barenghi, *Poetici primati. Saggio su letteratura e evoluzione*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2020, pp. 40-81, 92-128.

Monographic Part

Primary Texts

Primo Levi, *La chiave a stella*, a cura di Domenico Scarpa, Einaudi, Torino 2026.

Primo Levi, *La tregua*, Einaudi, Torino 2020.

One book selected from the following:

Primo Levi, *Storie naturali*, a cura di Martina Mengoni e Domenico Scarpa, Einaudi, Torino 2023 (only the following short stories: *Angelica Farfalla*, *L'amico dell'uomo*, *Alcune applicazioni del Mimete*, *Quaestio de Centauris*, *Il sesto giorno*).

Primo Levi, *Vizio di forma*, a cura di Domenico Scarpa, Einaudi, Torino 2024 (only the following short stories: *I sintetici*, *Procacciatori d'affari*, *Le nostre belle specificazioni*, *Recuenco: la Nutrice*, *Recuenco: il rafter*, *Il fabbro di se stesso*, *Il servo*).

Critical Bibliography

Mario Porro, *Primo Levi*, il Mulino, Bologna 2017, pp. 63-79, 81-100.

Niccolò Scaffai, *La chiave a stella*, in *Primo Levi*, a cura di Alberto Cavaglion, Carocci, Roma 2023, pp. 135-158.

Three essays selected from the following:

Mario Barenghi, *Uomo, istruzioni per il collaudo*, in Id., *Il chimico e l'ostrica. Studi su Primo Levi*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2022, pp. 15-31.

Mario Barenghi, Marco Belpoliti e Anna Stefi (a cura di), *Primo Levi*, numero monografico della rivista «Riga», Marcos y Marcos, Milano 2017, sezione *Primo Levi antropologo ed etologo*, saggi di Alessandro Cinquegrani, *Il nazismo e altri paradossi etologici. Lettura di «Storie naturali»*, pp. 461-475; Robert S.C. Gordon, *Primo Levi e il pensiero magico*, pp. 484-493; Martina Mengoni, *Lo scrittore e l'antropologo*, pp. 505-514; Federico Pianzola, *Il postumanesimo di Primo Levi: storie sulla co-evoluzione di natura e tecnica*, pp. 515-527; Domenico Scarpa, *La ricerca nel campo*, pp. 564-573.

Erasmus students are invited to contact the instructor to agree on the bibliography and the examination details.

Assessment methods

Type of assessment: oral examination conducted in Italian (except in special cases). No mid-term assessments are scheduled.

This mode was chosen because it is consistent with the formative objectives of the teaching and suitable for assessing comprehension of the text and the ability to critically rework the topics addressed in the course, mastery of expressive registers, and dialogue skills. In general, it is believed that the chosen mode also benefits in countering a now well attested sociolinguistic phenomenon, namely the loss of competence in oral elocution among

the younger generation, also fomented, during the schooling process, by the indiscriminate dissemination of written tests.

Evaluation Criteria:

The interview consists of checking the level of knowledge, understanding and reworking of the topics covered during the lectures, the texts read, the critical and bibliographical tools indicated in the program, in the materials uploaded on the e-learning platform, as well as the ability to apply the concepts and tools used during the classroom activities and/or learned from the texts in the bibliography.

Students should demonstrate the ability to answer questions in a relevant, clear, correct and argued manner, using critical terminology properly.

The assessment will be based on the Dublin Descriptors: the level bands are as follows:

1. High Level (25-30/30): Distinguished - Excellent

Knowledge and Understanding: The student demonstrates in-depth and solid knowledge of the texts and topics covered; understands and analyses the texts presented without hesitation.

Ability to apply knowledge: is able to identify general considerations on the authors/topics examined in the texts with confidence and effective personal observations; with adequate argumentative skills, is able to analyse, summarise, interpret, contextualise and compare the texts presented, also making use of interdisciplinary links.

Autonomy of Judgement: demonstrates excellent critical skills, autonomy of judgement and originality in the analysis and interpretation of texts.

Communication Skills: expresses themselves clearly, rigorously, fluently and appropriately. Is fully aware of the need to use different linguistic registers depending on the communicative situation.

Learning skills: demonstrates excellent/very good independent learning skills, is able to effectively rework knowledge and link it to their own experience; is fully aware of the usefulness of the discipline.

2. Average level (18-24/30): Sufficient - Good

Knowledge and understanding: The student demonstrates a general understanding of the texts and topics covered. Although there are some minor inaccuracies or a few uncertainties regarding specific, non-essential details, overall the student shows sufficient comprehension and a reasonable ability to analyse the texts.

Ability to apply knowledge: The student has some difficulty connecting general points to the examples provided in the texts. The summary of the content is sometimes not very effective, and the contextualization and comparison of authors and themes could be further developed.

Autonomy of judgement: The student demonstrates a fair degree of independence in forming critical assessments, although he or she sometimes tends to rely on the opinions of others.

Communication skills: expresses themselves clearly and with sufficient precision, with a reasonable command of the specific language of the discipline. Is aware of the need to use different linguistic registers depending on the communicative situation.

Learning skills: The student demonstrates a reasonable ability to apply knowledge and relate it to personal experience. An awareness of the subject's practical value is present, though it is still developing.

3. Basic Level (0–17/30): Still consolidating

Knowledge and understanding: The student demonstrates only a partial understanding of the texts and topics covered. Their grasp of the content is sometimes uncertain and requires further exploration and greater precision in interpretation.

Ability to apply knowledge: The student finds it difficult to link general considerations to the examples in the texts and to summarise the content effectively. Contextualisation and comparison between authors and themes still need to be developed.

Autonomy of judgement: Critical thinking and independent evaluation need to be guided through more personal reflection and reworking.

Communication skills: Oral presentation is at times somewhat halting; it would be advisable to strengthen the use of subject-specific vocabulary and improve precision of expression.

Learning skills: The student still shows difficulty in personally reworking knowledge and linking it to broader experiences and themes. Greater awareness of the educational value of the subject is desirable.

NB: Students with PUOI (special educational needs) must email the document before the exam.

Office hours

Student reception: By appointment only. Please contact the professor by email at francesco.diaco@unimib.it to schedule a meeting.

Meetings are held in the professor's office (Room 4096, 4th floor, Agora Building, U6). If preferred, it is also possible to arrange an online meeting in the professor's virtual room.

Programme validity

The course syllabus remains valid for two academic years.

Course tutors and assistants

Sustainable Development Goals

QUALITY EDUCATION | DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH | REDUCED INEQUALITIES | LIFE ON LAND | PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS
