Government 80: Civic Virtue through Literature

Summer 2014

Instructors: Aine Donovan, Ethics Institute
James B. Murphy, Government Department. Office: 206 Silsby.
James.B.Murphy@Dartmouth.edu

Rationale

Civic virtue is a complex moral and political achievement. What are the components of civic virtue? Civic virtue includes civic knowledge, that is, true information about civic institutions and ideals, ranging from “how a bill becomes a law” to understanding debates about citizenship. But civic virtue also includes civic skills, such as how to debate and deliberate, how to petition and protest, and how to advocate and how to administer. Yet, no amount of civic knowledge or civic skill is sufficient for civic virtue, since civic knowledge and civic skills are often used in the service of corrupt and wicked agendas. In addition to civic knowledge and civic skill, we must possess good civic motivations: we must sincerely seek to promote the good of the whole community and to respect the dignity of each individual person. But a good will is not itself sufficient for civic virtue, since in politics the best intentions, if undisciplined by knowledge and skill, lead us rapidly to disaster.

Why civic virtue through literature? Studies show that good civic motivations cannot be effectively taught in any direct way. Students rightly reject preaching and indoctrination. But many classics of literature deal with themes of civic life and these stories provide an ideal basis for discussions of civic ideals and civic motivations. What does it mean to be a citizen? Is citizenship a right or a duty? What happens when public loyalties conflict with private loyalties? What should we do when law conflicts with justice? Do men and women have different kinds of civic virtues? Because literary classics do not have a single right answer, they provide a “democratic” venue for open-ended discussion of these controversial topics: literature does not preach or command or indoctrinate. Rarely are the characters in these stories either simply good or bad: these authors challenge us to see the mixture of good and bad in complex human beings. That is itself a civic virtue and one that is essential for the effort to resolve our differences in a peaceful way. The enjoyment of literature requires us to learn to empathize with people who are very different from us, to see the world from the point of view of people whom we initially find repellent. In reading great stories, we find ourselves becoming sympathetic to the most bizarre and even wicked characters. These literary skills of role-taking and moral imagination are also essential for productive and rational political deliberation. Abraham Lincoln used to say that if he were from the Deep South, he would probably also support slavery. Lincoln’s great civic magnanimity reveals his literary ability to imagine himself as a character in a different story.
from his own. In short, there is an intrinsic connection between the skills of literary engagement and the skills of civic engagement.

In this course, we shall be reading, discussing, and writing about great stories illustrating various civic virtues and vices. But we shall not be treating these stories as mere diversions from lands far away and times long ago. Instead, we shall focus on connecting these stories to our own lives. We shall practice listening to each other in class as carefully as we “listen” to the characters in these stories; we shall attempt to understand and empathize with the very different points of view we encounter among our classmates. In particular, we shall be asking students to answer three kinds of questions about these stories: What does the story mean to its author? How does the story apply to my life? How do I evaluate the ideas and characters in the story? In their presentations and essay, students will be required to connect these stories to their own lives and to evaluate these stories according to their own civic ideals.

**LEARNING GOALS:** Students who actively apply themselves to this course’s readings, discussions, papers, and presentations will become better citizens in these respects: First, students will be able to discuss competing conceptions of citizenship and to assess the relative merits of citizenship as an ideal of human life. Second, students will be able to apply the ideals of citizenship we find in these stories to their own on-going public commitments. Third, students will develop civic skills of role-taking, empathetic imagination, and democratic deliberation in the course of mastering these classic stories.

**REQUIREMENTS:** 1) Students are required to read all of the assigned stories in advance of the date listed on the syllabus. 2) Students are required to attend every class meeting listed on the syllabus. 3) Students are required to copy out a passage from the assigned reading each week that you find especially puzzling, inspirational, or outrageous and post it on Canvas with an explanation of why you selected it. 4) Students are required to write three short essays on passages you select from our assigned stories: one of exegesis, one of application, and one of evaluation. 5) Students are required to make two oral presentations in class. 6) Students are required to write one 20-page Term Paper which will be based on two shorter 8-10 page essays, each of which will be revised.

The short essays are each worth about 5% of the grade, each oral presentation is worth about 5%, the term paper is worth about 45%, and class participation (including attendance, reading responses on Blackboard, debates, discussion and other activities) is worth about 25%.

**ASSESSMENT:** Each student will be assessed before and after this course to measure the effects of the course on specific aspects of civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic motivations. Before the course, students will read a short story and evaluating the moral choices of the characters; after the course, the students will evaluate this same story again. We will then qualitatively compare their before and after responses to see how our course has changed their perception and understanding of civic values.
Schedule

**Week One:** Private Woman, Public Man: Sophocles’ *Antigone* and Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*

**Week Two:** Just War: Shakespeare *Henry V*.

**Week Three:** Civic Judgment: Law or Justice: Herman Melville’s “Billy Budd.”

**Week Four:** Civic Naturalism: Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*.


**Week Seven:** The Rule of Law and Bureaucracy: Kafka’s *The Trial* or *The Castle*.

**Week Eight:** Politics and Occupation: Albert Camus’s *The Plague*.

**Week Nine:** Innocents Abroad: Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*.

**Week Ten:** Civic Leadership Begins at Home: Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. 