

Teaching *Journey to the West* in World Literature Courses

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See also:

- Buddhism in the Classic Chinese Novel *Journey to the West*: Teaching Two Episodes
<http://www.exeas.org/resources/buddhism-journey-to-west.html>
- Background Information for Teaching *Journey to the West*
<http://www.exeas.org/resources/buddhism-journey-bg-info.html>

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Introduction

Given the accessibility of the text, *Journey to the West* works well in courses in world literature, world novel, and Asian studies. Given the late 16th-century date of the text, it can be taught in the middle of a one-semester World Literature course or at the end or beginning of a course in World Literature I or II. For colleges which offer only one course in world literature, *Journey to the West* will fall in about the middle of the course. For colleges which offer World Literature I and II, the text can be taught either at the end of the first course or the beginning of the second. The *Norton Anthology* places it at the beginning of the second set of volumes (Volume D), World Literature II. However, the *Bedford Anthology* places it at the end of Book 3, which places it in World Literature I. Teacher's Guides available for the various anthologies offer numerous suggestions for structuring the course syllabus and comparing various texts. The suggestions below are for paper topics or extended course discussion or exams. They can be adapted according to the teacher's selection of anthology, texts, dates covered, and course focus, or may just help spark ideas.

Discussion questions and paper topics are provided for using the text in courses in World Literature I and II, comparing the text to others that might appear on those syllabi. Students may be asked to choose one of the topics and write a focused essay of 3-5 pages, citing specific passages from the texts to support and illustrate their points.

Topics for World Literature I

1. Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West* all involve lengthy journeys. Choosing one of the first two texts and *Journey to the West*, compare and contrast the texts, considering the following: motives for the journey; the companionship or lack thereof and effect of this on progress of the journey; problems encountered and how they are

resolved; and what it means to the main character(s) to reach the goal. Finally, offer some ideas on how the different cultures reflected in the texts affect the various outcomes and/or philosophies presented.

2. There is lack of consensus on whether or not Hanuman, the Monkey King in *The Ramayana*, may have influenced the development of the Monkey King of Chinese folklore and *Journey to the West*. Using the selections we've read, compare the roles these two characters play in their respective texts and compare and contrast their respective characteristics and actions. Based on what you discover in this process, offer your own opinion as to whether the earlier portrait from India might have influenced the Chinese Monkey King.

3. Using the ideas either from Confucius, *Analects*, or Lao Zi, *Dao De Jing*, analyze how Confucian or Daoist ideas inform Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West*. For example, you might apply Confucian ideas of community and human relationships, or Daoist ideas of non-action and following the Dao, etc. Be very specific in applying and citing the earlier texts to show that this is a Confucian or Daoist journey.

Topics for World Literature II

1. For both Voltaire's *Candide* and Wu Cheng'en's *Monkey*, the relationships these characters have with their fellow travelers are important. Using specific relationships, discuss the idea of community, friendship, and love or respect, and the importance of these values to the main characters and to their motives and actions. [Note: The differences in meaning of the term "Enlightenment" for the contexts of these works should be discussed in class, or could be incorporated into this paper topic.]

2. Matsuo Basho, in his *Narrow Road of the Interior*, says that for many, "travel is life, travel is home" (Norton Anthology, Vol. D, 607). The travelers in works we have read have various motives for undertaking their travels and for continuing them. They encounter a variety of adventures and undergo a range of emotions. Choose either Voltaire's *Candide* or Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and compare and contrast the travelers' motives and their views and feeling about what they observe and experience with that of the travelers in Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West*. Is travel "life" and/or "home" for any of these travelers? Explain your conclusions as fully as possible.

3. Several of the characters in texts we have read are looked up to as authoritative figures by others in the work: Pangloss, the Monk Tripitaka, Kuan-yin, Master Houyhnhnm. Choosing two or three of these figures, from at least two different texts and cultures, explain what it is that gives the characters authority, what others expect of them or how they regard them, and what influence they have on the course of events. Does the view of these characters' authority change over the course of the selection, and if so, why? Given the satire in these works, does the reader (do you) perceive the bases for authority and the authoritative figures in the same light as do the characters within the works?

English Translations of *Journey to the West*

The major translators have been Arthur Waley (1943), Anthony Yu (who withholds authorial attribution to Wu, 1977) and W.J.F Jenner (2001; 1977-1986). An abridged “retelling” by David Kherdian was published in 2000.

Jenner, W. J. F., trans. *Journey to the West*. Wu Cheng'en. Intro. Shi Changyu. 4 vols. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2001 (1997-1986).

This is the most recent complete translation. It's quite colloquial and the Chinese names are given in pinyin, the current transliteration usage internationally. (Jenner also translates more Chinese proper nouns into English and Sanskrit names into Chinese than does Yu.) The prose and poetry are dynamic, accessible to students, and fun. It's available only in the four-volume slip-cased set, not in any of the anthologies. For a course in Asian studies or world novel, where more time can be spent on the text, instructors may want to consider using this translation.

Kherdian, David. *Monkey: A Journey to the West. A retelling of the Chinese folk novel by Wu Ch'eng-en*. Boston & London: Shambhala, 2000.

This edition mimics the Waley in providing a condensed version for classroom use; major selections are from Chapters 1-7, 14, 59-61, and 98-100. Like Waley, Kherdian omits the introductory couplets, most of the poetry, and the Heart Sutra. Includes lovely black and white reproductions of the woodblock illustrations of Hokusai (1760-1849) and other artists from an 1833 Japanese retelling.

Waley, Arthur, trans. *Monkey: Folk Novel of China by Wu Ch'eng-en*. 1943. Reprint, New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1970.

The edition that popularized the novel; provides most of thirty chapters, but omits most of the poetry, the introductory couplets, and the Heart Sutra.

Waley's translation is anthologized in the following:

The Bedford Anthology of World Literature. Book 3: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650. Ed. Paul Davis et al. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004. 832-911. (Ch. 8, from Ch. 12-13, Ch. 14, 16-21, from Ch. 22, 28).

Literatures of Asia From Antiquity to the Present. Ed. Tony Barnstone. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003. 341-357 (Ch. 1-2).

Literatures of Asia, Africa, and Latin America From Antiquity to the Present. Ed. Willis Barnstone and Tony Barnstone. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999. 338-355. (Ch. 1-2).

The Norton Anthology of World Literature, Vol. D: 1650-1800. 2nd ed. Ed. Sarah Lawall. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002. 8-71. (Ch 1, 14-21).

Western Literature in a World Context. Vol. 1: The Ancient World through the Renaissance. Ed. Paul Davis et al. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. 2134-2202. (Ch. 8; from Ch. 12-13; Ch. 14-21; from Ch. 22, 28).

The World of Literature. Ed. Louise Westling et al. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999. 1049-1060. (from Ch. 16, Ch. 17).

Yu, Anthony C., trans. and ed. *The Journey to the West.* 4 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

Yu's four-volume set is the first complete English translation. The introduction and notes are scholarly, detailed, and extensive. This translation is highly recommended to the instructor and advanced students for its detailed background and explication. However, these features — and the expense of the individual volumes — make this edition most appropriate only for upper-level or graduate courses. Yu uses the old Wade/Giles transliteration of Chinese names.

Yu's translation is anthologized in the following:

The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature. Ed. Victor H. Mair. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. 966-980. (Ch. 7).

The Longman Anthology of World Literature, Vol. C: The Early Modern Period. Ed. Jane Tylus and David Damrosch. New York: Pearson Longman, 2004. 30-107. (from Ch. 1, 2, 7, 8, 12; Ch. 53; from 69-72, 98, 99, 100).