



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

“This Blessed House” Reading through a Religious Lens

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Abstract

Using religious lenses to explore literature can yield fruitful insights for students into central questions of belief, practice, belonging, place, and identity. For my project, I propose a class activity in which students read, discuss, and respond through writing to the short story, “This Blessed House,” by Jhumpa Lahiri. This activity is designed as a three-day sequence in a term-long English elective for Spring Term seniors. Students will use a set of questions to focus on the explicit and implicit religious practices in the story and discuss related questions about what it means to be “good” (especially good in a religion, such as “a good little Hindu”) and how objects promote religious affiliation and “goodness.”

Link to text: [“This Blessed House,”](#) by Jhumpa Lahiri

Activity: Reading “This Blessed House” through a Religious Lens
A Unit in English XII: Encountering Culture, Identity, and the Religious Self/Other

Pedagogical Goals

Knowing

- To allow students to see an example of religious diversity and commonality through literature
- To use literature to demonstrate some ways in which religion is local, situated, and focused on relationships
- To increase students understanding of the concept of “lived religion” as a way to promote civic engagement and help students build relationships with their neighbors

Doing

- To allow students to produce literary criticism and creative writing projects, using a religious lens to focus their exploration of the text
- To give students experience discussing religious beliefs and practices while using respectful, academic language

Relationship to Course

This English XII elective is an offering for spring-term seniors. Those who choose to take it will have an expressed interest in learning more about world religions with literature, including a novel, a collection of short stories, and poetry. Students will also produce a piece of creative writing - either fiction or memoir - which will allow them to apply some of the course themes in their own imaginative way.

As a literature course, the central focus of the class is on how religion helps us understand literature, rather than how literature helps us understand religion. Still, a central tenet of the course is that fictional literary texts can teach “truths”; as Nafisi Azar, author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, puts it, we should not “under any circumstances, belittle a work of fiction by trying to turn it into a carbon copy of real life; what we search for in fiction is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth” (Kindle Locations 199-201). By exploring the “truth claims” of fiction, using religion as a lens, students may find their own epiphanies about key dimensions of the human experience.

The course is organized by themes, and within each theme are assignments for literature, background readings on various religions, and written responses. Below are a list of units and some representative texts from each unit. Excerpts from *God is Not One*, by Stephen R. Prothero, will give students additional background information on many religious traditions. I am deliberately not organizing the course by religious categories in hopes of promoting expansive conversations about how a variety of essential questions can be addressed within a variety of religious traditions.

The following outline is suggestive but not comprehensive, with the section including “This Blessed House” highlighted to show how it fits into the course. Reading “This Blessed House,” is part of a larger unit on religious practices, and also an opportunity to talk about Hinduism.

Introduction

Talking about religion at school

Read: Winthrop, William

Beliefs

What is faith? Why do beliefs matter?

Read: “[The Conversion of the Jews](#),” Philip Roth

Read: [First Confession](#),” by Frank O’Connor

Practices

What is lived religion? What activities constitute religious practice?

Read: “[This Blessed House](#),” Jhumpa Lahiri

Read: “[Jubilate Agno, For I Will Consider My Cat, Jeoffry](#)” (poem)

Read: “[Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church](#),” Emily Dickinson (poem)

Read: “[Shoveling Snow with Buddha](#),” Billy Collins (poem)

Institutions

Who is in and who is out?

Set Theory (and the [Emergent Church Movement](#))

Read: *I Love, I Hate, I Miss My Sister*, Amelie Sarn

Read: “[Revelation](#),” Flannery O’Connor

Identity

How does religion contribute to a sense of self, culture, ethnicity, and family?

Read: *Buddha in the Attic*, Julie Otsuka ([Reading Guide](#))

Implementation

Day 1

Pre-reading discussion and begin reading the short story, “This Blessed House”

Discussion Questions:

What do people have to believe or do to show that they are a member of a particular faith community?

What are some objects people consider religious, and what role do religious objects play in the practice of religion?

When is a practice cultural integration/embracing vs. cultural appropriation?

Is it all right to claim more than one faith tradition as your own? What about if they openly conflict with one another on some points?

Homework: Finish reading the story

Day 2

Discussion of the story; Hinduism

Discussion Questions:

Title: Is this house blessed? Why or why not?

Characters: Give three words or phrases that describe Sanjeev, then do the same for Twinkle.

What forces/factors lead to the marriage of these two? Do you predict that the marriage succeeds or fails in the long term?

Is Sanjeev’s frustration and concern about Twinkle’s growing collection of Christian objects justified? Why or why not?

What is the actual conflict in this marriage - what is the root problem?

The narrator refers to Twinkle as “content yet curious” (56). Is this a positive comment from the narrator? What about from the point of view of Sanjeev? Twinkle?

Setting: Notice the objects in this home. Not just the obviously religious ones - also the solarium, the wainscoting, etc. What does Lahiri accomplish by foregrounding various objects?

Resolution: What do you make of the last lines of this story?

Homework: Read Prothero excerpt, “Hinduism”

Day 3

How does your new understanding of Hinduism change your reading of the story?

Discussion Questions:

- Discuss Sanjeev's concerns (and personality overall) in terms of orthodoxy.
- What makes an object sacred?
- How does Sanjeev construct "the good person"? How does Twinkle? Why does Twinkle call herself "a good little Hindu"?
- How does Sanjeev think of valuable work? How does Twinkle?
- Identify examples of religious imagery in the story in addition to the Christian objects. What other patterns emerge?
- Why did these two decide to marry each other? Given Sanjeev's yearning for a more traditional wife (who cooks and cleans, etc.) why did he choose Twinkle in the first place?
- Why does Twinkle tell Sanjeev, "I hate you?" (149).
- Why does Sanjeev fear "hidden wonders he could not anticipate, or see?"
- True or False: A good Hindu can also be Christian, but a good Christian can not also be Hindu. Explain your answer.

Discuss the following quotations as they contribute to the story overall.

- "But it could be worth something, who knows?" (136).
- "'No we're not Christian. We're good little Hindus.' She planted a kiss on top of Christ's head" (137).
- "These items meant something to Twinkle, but they meant nothing to him" (138).
- "I will tolerate, for now, your little Biblical menagerie" (139).
- "They didn't bother her, these scattered, unsettled matters" (141).
- "He had not bothered to notice" (145).
- "All the neighbors will see. They'll think we're insane" (146).
- "'I hope you don't mind my asking,' Douglas said, 'but I noticed the statue outside and are you guys Christian? I thought you were Indian'" (151).
- "He hated its immensity, and its flawless, polished surface, and its undeniable value" (157).

Homework: Online Post

Option 1: Write a section of the story from the point of view of whoever it was who placed these objects around the house before they left. What's up with that?

Option 2: Make a catalogue of objects in this story that might be imbued with significance - both traditional religion and perhaps more broadly, ritual practices or symbols. What do you learn from your list?

After you post your writing, respond to at least one post of a classmate.

Standards

Given my context as a teacher in a nonreligious, independent school, I have a lot of latitude in the teaching of this particular course. My aim would be to fulfill the pedagogical goals I laid out at the beginning of this document. I would also like to comply with the law and constitutional limits placed on the teaching of religion in public schools, though I am not at a public school, because I think they are sound. In particular, I would like to engage students on questions of the influence of religion on culture, identity, and community, but I would like students to be clear throughout the course that I am neither advocating nor discouraging any particular, personal religious beliefs or actions for students. I want students to understand that the study of religion is a legitimate academic activity, one that contributes overall to a full liberal arts education and a growing sense of responsibility to social justice in all our communities.

For information about the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity, see: www.religiousworldsnyc.org.