

EN 3004 Storytelling and Catholicism
Spring 2016
Stokes S 209, Wed: 4:30-5:45

Judith.wilt@bc.edu
Stokes S487, 2-3702
Office Hours:
Tues. 11-12, Wed.3-4
and by appointment

Within the field of literature and religion the newer field of 'Catholic Studies' has emerged, to pay close attention both to varieties of Catholic experience and to how the world at large experiences, or imagines, 'the Catholic.' We'll look at four short stories suggesting a multicultural dimension to 'the Catholic,' and read two novels, Robert Stone's A Flag for Sunrise, featuring Americans experiencing the political intrigue and spiritual intensity of Central America in the 1980's, and Mary Gordon's Pearl, following the journey of an American into the still tense Ireland of the 2000's. A final "reading" will examine and compare two films about priests, nuns, children, and American parish life – The Bells of St. Mary's and Doubt. Writing will include a few short reflection papers to help guide class discussion, and two final take-home essays questions. There will be room also for discussion, and writing if you wish, about other works in any genre of storytelling – memoirs, TV shows, songs or poems, etc – that you may already have an interest in. **This one credit course seminar meets Wednesdays from 4:30-5:45 through April 6, leaving the last month of the semester free for your final work in other courses.**

Schedule of readings, writing, discussion

Wed. Jan 20: introduction: what's storytelling? what's Catholicism? Who are we and what storytelling about Catholicism are we already familiar with? What are we reading in the course, and why? What do you think of Greeley and Carroll's comments below? Some practice reading/discussion with stories and poems. Short story booklet handed out.

Wed. Jan. 27: read, take notes, bring notes to class on Flannery O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" (1955) and Sandra Cisneros's "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" (1991).

Wed. Feb. 3: ditto for Robert Olen Butler's "Relic" (1993) and Phil Klay's "Prayer in the Furnace" (2014). Handout with historical background on next reading. Sign up for next week's required conferences.

Week of Feb. 8: Individual conferences: follow up on first week's discussions, the course so far, and any additional interests you might have that the course might make room for. And your experience getting into the Stone novel....

Wed. Feb. 17: some background on historical context, and discussion of Robert Stone's A Flag for Sunrise (1981): read up through p. 173.

Wed. Feb. 24: continued discussion of A Flag for Sunrise: read up through p. 293.

Wed. Mar. 1: finish A Flag for Sunrise...bring with you a two page reflection paper on a single character, image, or scene that has come to interest you.

Week of Mar. 8: SPRING BREAK WEEK

Wed. Mar. 16: Some background on Mary Gordon's Pearl (2005): read the first two sections, "The Call" and "Travellers," through to p. 176.

Wed. Mar. 23: Finish Pearl...bring with you a two page reflection paper on a single character, image or scene that has come to interest you. Paper graded.

On Wed. Mar. 30 and Wed. Apr. 6 we will use class time (and more) to watch our two last "texts," the films The Bells of Saint Mary's (1945) and Doubt (2008), about priests, nuns and children in the urban American Catholic parish. These films will be the subject of one of the essay questions on your two-question final take-home exam, given out Apr. 6 for return Apr. 13. Grading: papers 40%, participation 30%, final exam 30%.

The distinguished Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, displeased by the anthropomorphic language predicated of God, tried to sweep it away by talking about a God beyond God, about whom nothing at all could be said or known except negatively. Two different ways of approaching the divine reality arose out of the Reformation. Put more simply, the Catholic imagination loves metaphors; Catholicism is a verdant rainforest of metaphors. The Protestant imagination distrusts metaphors; it tends to be a desert of metaphors. Catholicism stresses the "like" of any comparison (human passion is like divine passion), while Protestantism, when it is willing to use metaphors, stresses the unlike...

I am not claiming either virtue or deliberate intent for a Catholic artist or writer when I say his or her work displays a Catholic sensibility. When I say, for example, that Scorsese's Mean Streets is profoundly Catholic, it will not do to reply with stories about his marital problems. When I claim that The Power and the Glory is a profound Catholic novel about the sacrament of the priesthood, it would be inappropriate to reply with arguments about Greene and his mistress. To see God and creation through Catholic eyes it is not necessary to be a good Catholic, whatever that is. (Better to leave such judgments to God anyway.) Gounod probably realized that Faust was a profoundly Catholic Opera. Verdi probably saw nothing especially Catholic about the sacrifice and redemption themes in La Traviata. **Andrew Greeley, The Catholic Imagination (2000)**

I left the priesthood to be a writer... It is as a writer that I have discovered a way of being that goes to the core of Catholic faith as I live it—that largeness of the Church that is so much more than governance. The redemptive shape of narrative form, the unquenchable thirst for meaning, the implication-laden tension between language and what remains forever unspoken, the contemplative habit of absorbedness, the dark night of the soul as a source of illumination, God as the author of creation, why we call Jesus 'Word,' the final inadequacy of all expression, which is the first value of it—such momentous experiences had eluded me until I became a writer....

What is a bad Catholic anyway? Once it was clear. Hard drinkers, womanizers, men with a public taste for sin. Late in life, writers like Eugene O'Neill and F. Scott Fitzgerald were haunted by their status as bad Catholics. O'Neill nearly saw a priest on his deathbed, but his domineering wife refused to allow it. Bad Catholics were in bad marriages, or they were openly gay, or they had abortions, or they practiced artificial birth control or left the priesthood. The issue is murkier now.... Not long ago bad Catholics were also known as cafeteria Catholics, choosing beliefs as much by conscience as by the menu of authority, but it seems now that Catholics from left to right approach the cafeteria line, eyeing options. This confusion is a good thing. It undermines the moralistic polarity that infected the Church's thinking about itself. **James Carroll, Practicing Catholic (2009)**