What is epic poetry and where does it come from? What does it mean to call something “epic”? What do epic poems say about the societies—their morals, values, religion, sexuality, social hierarchy, politics, history—that produce them? Why is it that certain genres of poetry disappear with time, but epic has remained a consistent feature of the Western literary tradition? What is it in epic that we can’t do without? To answer these questions, we’ll read examples of epic poems from the classical (the *Iliad*), medieval (*Beowulf*), early modern (Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*), and modern (Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*) world. The class will ultimately consider how poems about warriors and gods doing extraordinary things get transformed into stories about women and men doing ordinary—but somehow still no less epic—things.

Required Texts


William Shakespeare, *Henry V* 978-0451526908


Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 978-0156907392

Course Requirements

Quizzes

Four papers

Class Participation

Discussion Posts