

**English 272(W) Introduction to Literature: Culture and Literature—
Florence & Surroundings in Literature**

Description

In this section of ENG 272, specifically planned for Study Abroad, we will read selected Italian and English-language literature that features Florence. Our focus will be on how these texts imaginatively locate themselves in the culture of Florence. Class discussion and writing assignments will encourage students to appreciate and think critically about the art, buildings, living culture and landscapes in Florence/Tuscany that resonate with the themes and histories of the literature we read. **Texts:** Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* and selected sonnets such as "Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare"; selections from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*; Robert Browning's "Fra Filippo Lippi" and "Andrea Del Sarto"; E. M. Forster's *Room with a View* and 1986 Merchant Ivory Productions film; selected passages/scenes from Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and 1996 Anthony Minghella film; Anna Banti's *Artemisia*; Ridley Scott's 2001 film, *Hannibal*; Magdalen Nabb's *The Innocent*.

Syllabus

This course will reflect on selected representations of Florence and its culture from Medieval times into the XXI century. We will focus on what literature, film, and art tell us about Florentine history and—considering the appeal that Florence holds for its foreign visitors as an imagined community and landscape—the culture of those writing about it. We will complement and challenge these readings with what Florence as a living city today tells us about its past and present.

In the first four weeks we will read Dante's *Inferno* as well as selections from Boccaccio's *Decameron* (the frame tale in which 10 aristocratic men and women meet in Santa Maria Novella and decide to leave plague-infested Florence for a villa in the countryside where they will tell each other stories for 10 days; "Ser Ciappelletto" 1,1; the preamble to Day 4; "Frate Alberto" 4,2; "Guido Cavalcanti" 6,9; "Frate Cipolla e San Lorenzo" 6,10; "The Abbess" 9.2) to learn about Florence in medieval times—its internal political strife as a city state, strategic role in the competition of empire and church in medieval Europe, 1348 experience with the Black Death plague, and thriving economy—and to familiarize ourselves with two of the literary artists who made Florence and its vernacular (*volgare fiorentino*) into a focal point of origin for Italian literature and modern European literature as well. We will foreground in our discussions themes of political freedom, survival, and social violence for which institutions are responsible or cannot control. Several sites in Florence today provide further information on Dante (1265-1321) and Boccaccio (1313-1373), their lives and the settings for their work: la Casa di Dante or Dante's house (a small museum now in the historical center of Florence); Dante's portrait by Giotto in the Bargello Gallery; Andrea Del Castagno's frescos of Dante and Boccaccio; Boccaccio statue outside the Uffizi; churches including Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce.

The following two weeks will be dedicated to Renaissance Florence with selected poems by Lorenzo il Magnifico and Michelangelo Buonarroti, and some information from Giorgio Vasari's *Vite* (verbal portraits of visual artists). Lorenzo (1449–92) succeeded (1469) his father, Piero de' Medici, as head of the Medici family and as virtual ruler of Florence playing a crucial role in its artistic Renaissance. He was a patron of Sandro Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Filippino Lippi, Andrea

del Verrocchio, Michelangelo, and other famed artists. While this is the shortest section in the course in terms of reading, Renaissance Florence sites abound; especially relevant will be the Cappelle Medicee and the Uffizi.

The second half of the course shifts to the representation of Florence and Tuscany by foreign visitors. Victorian poet Robert Browning lived in Florence for about ten years starting in 1847, and he used Vasari's work as a source for his own life-writing about Renaissance Italian artists. We will read two of his dramatic monologues, "Fra Filippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto," where the tension between art and religion is a central concern. Next we will read E. M. Forster's novel *Room with a View* (1908), a splendid example of the construction of Italy—and Florence specifically—as a place whose beauty incites passion and transgression. This novel will allow us not only to discuss the representation of an emergent touristic desire in the novel, but to contrast ideas about women's liberation with the status of women in Italy at the time.

The final weeks of the course focus on Florence in the contemporary imaginary as figured in literature and film, especially in connection with the topoi of World War II and tourism. The 1986 Merchant Ivory Productions filmic adaptation of *Room with a View* will serve as a transition into visual representations of Florence in a globalized culture (which films like *Under the Tuscan Sun* openly commercialize). We will then read Anna Banti's novel *Artemisia* (1947), which brings together the story of Artemisia Gentileschi, a XVII-century painter whose art defiantly told of her own rape, and Banti's life in Florence during the Nazi occupation of Italy in the 1940s. To this self-reflective novel by an Italian woman writer, we will juxtapose selected passages/scenes from Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and 1996 Anthony Minghella film, which focus on Tuscany in World War II. Finally, in different ways, Ridley Scott's 2001 detective film, *Hannibal*, and Magdalen Nabb's crime novel, *The Innocent* (2005) represent contemporary Florence and its touristic sites as the background for stories of violence. The Uffizi Gallery and esthetics play a crucial role in *Hannibal*. *The Innocent* also takes its readers on a tour of Florence, starting in the Giardini dei Boboli, where a woman has been murdered. The commodification of art in Florence's tourist industry is a focus in the film, as are the struggles of Florentine artisans confronting today's global economy in the novel. All of this calls into question the relationship between tourism, mass culture, and the artistic legacy that resides in Florence.

Assignments and Grades

The main writing assignments will be three four-page critical and analytical essays about literary texts from different sections of the course and their relation to Florentine culture and history. For two of these papers, students' writing process—focused free-writing, drafts, and revisions—will be taken into account, drafts will be discussed in conference, and at least one draft will be graded. There will also be one short paper (two pages), reflecting on a specific location (e.g., church, museum, Fiesole) in connection with our readings, and at least one oral presentation per student on a different site in Florence with a focus on its history, cultural significance, touristic representation, and other social uses. Grades: critical essays 60%; short paper 10%; oral presentation 15%; participation and attendance 15%. (If the class were to be very small, I would ask for more oral presentations from each student and increase the weight of the presentations and participation.)