

MØNA 1300 – History of Middle Eastern Literature

Teacher: Stephan Guth

Sensorveiledning

General:

In this course, students have been introduced to a selection of authors and short stories dealing with key topics in Middle Eastern literature.

They have become familiar with some basic analytical tools and interpretation techniques.

They have learnt to understand literature as a symbolic expression and gain insights into important literary traditions.

They have been trained to see literary texts in their historical context(s) and in a comparative as well as a wider cultural perspective.

They have learnt to discuss their analysis and interpretation hypotheses in a workgroup and to present these orally in front of the class and in writing in the form of a concise, encyclopedia entry-like summary.

Teaching:

The course was based on a total of 13 two-hour sessions (one lecture/seminar per week). Students were expected to read the syllabus texts before attending lectures and seminars.

Obligatory activities:

In order to be admitted to the exam, students were asked to complete the following mandatory activities:

- 1) Prepare an oral presentation on one of the curriculum texts (see weekly schedule and assignments in Canvas) and lead the discussion in the corresponding seminar. Typically this was done as a group work (2-3 students per group). The presentation should (a) present a brief summary of the content, (b) describe the author's choice of topic, character, narrative perspective, space and time, structure and stylistic features of the text, and (c) develop and present some ideas about the interpretation of the text against its historical backdrop.
- 2) Prepare a short summary, similar to an encyclopedia entry (1 page, ca. 500 words) based on the presentations and in-class discussions. The paper had to be handed to the teacher within one week after the oral presentation, and re-submitted after having integrated the comments and suggestions of the teacher.

All presentations and submissions of assignments had to be completed and submitted within the specified deadlines (and approved by the teacher).

Examination

Home examination over three days

A three days long home examination culminating in the submission of a paper of approx. 5 pages – in total approx. 1500 words (font: Times New Roman 12 point, 1,5 line spacing and margins of approx. 2.5 cm). Students were told that their essays should neither be shorter than 10% below the ‘default’ length, nor exceed it by more than 10%, and that footnotes and references will *not* count towards the total of words.

In the assignment the students were asked to answer 3 general questions on the basis of the lectures and overview articles in the syllabus (Part A) and write an essay comparing two literary texts (typically the one they had presented in class and another one they found suitable for comparison) (Part B). They were told that, preferably, all texts should be from the syllabus or the course book (*Literary Visions*), but exceptions were possible, provided previous agreement with the teacher.

Part A

This part consisted of three general questions, two of which of a methodological character, the third about the key characteristics of a major shift in the history of modern Middle Eastern literatures.

- 1) What is the difference between “analysis” and “interpretation,” and why is it important to distinguish between the two? • *max. approx. 100 words.*

“Analysis” means taking a ‘blood test’, describing *which choices* an author has made regarding topic/theme, characteres, narrative structure, focalisation/perspective, space, time, style, etc. Unlike the merely descriptive analysis, “interpretation” seeks to explain all these choices from the historical (or personal, or other) background (contextualisation). It is important to distinguish between the two in order to avoid ahistorical readings (which would prevent the use of literary texts as historical documents, i.e., authors’ comments on the worlds they are living in).

- 2) What is wrong with the following statement: “Author X wrote the short story Y in the early 1950s, i.e. during the period of ‘Social realism.’ Therefore he/she chose to write about poverty.” • *max. approx. 200 words.*

Periods are not agents that impose certain choices (topic, styles, etc.) on authors but mere practical constructs that allow the analyst and literary critic to speak about time intervals during which authors, on account of their view on the worlds they live in, tend to make similar choices. Periods are concepts we use to have words for clusters of common features. The statement is wrong because not periods determine authors’ choices, but the decision, made by a larger number of writers, to write about poverty in a certain, ‘realistic’ way may be the reason for a literary historian to talk about a whole “period” of Social Realism.

- 3) Account for some basic differences between “modern” and “postmodern” writers in the Middle East, especially regarding their general world view, their understanding of the relationship between literature and reality, and literature’s function and potential in society • *max. approx. 300 words.*

The shift from a “modern(ist)” to a “postmodern” attitude can be observed, in the Arab World, mainly as a consequence of the shock of the defeat in the 1967 war, which initiated the decline of the modernist Nasser regime. However, a similiar shift takes place also in other countries of the Middle East, so that it cannot merely be attributed to the demise of Nasserism. First doubts that the belief in modernist reformism (as initiated during the 19th century) appear already in the late 1950s, early 1960s, mainly due to the social problems accompanying urbanisation and industrialisation. After 1967, critic E al-Kharrāṭ observes a “New Sensibility” among Arab

writers, all of whom try, in one way or another, to find new foundations after the collapse of the “grand narrative” that held that literature was capable of ‘mirroring’ and faithfully depicting reality (mimetic Realism). While the authors of this phase still believe in the reformist potential of literature, later authors (esp. O. Pamuk) are very skeptical about that. With regard to authorship, postmodern authors no longer believe in the absolute ‘originality’ or ‘authenticity’ of their writing but rather go for a ‘palimpsestic’ view. From the 1980s onward, decreasing belief in dominant discourses creates room for renewal and the emergence of hitherto marginalised or silenced voices, and the acceptance of ‘lower’ genres (historical novel, detective fiction, sci-fi, ‘pornography’, etc.) into the literary canon.

Part B

Compare two fictional texts (novel, short stories) from Modern Middle Eastern Literature in relation to their content (theme, main character, plot, etc.) and form (structure, perspective, style, etc.). One of the texts can be one that you have already analyzed (presented in class and/or written a short text about). The other should be a text that you have not presented nor written about it before. In the comparison, you should highlight:

- EITHER: the most important/typical traits of a literary period
- OR: continuity and changes in the authors’ dealing with a certain topic (e.g., religion, migration, urbanization, language, etc.)

Link the results of your analysis to the context in which the texts were written.

The answer should be circa 1500 words ($\pm 10\%$).

Criteria for evaluation (applicable to both part A and B)

- Does the essay answer the questions? How does it so (degree of coherence, internal consistency)?
- Are the primary texts understood and read according to the questions? Does the paper show analytical operations (e.g., ask and answer questions from the *arbeidsark*/worksheet: main topic, characters/protagonists, plot, perspective, ...) and are the results of the analysis used for argumentation (not simply mechanically listed, without consequences)?
- Is reference literature used, and if so, to which extent (and is it understood, i.e., used correctly/convincingly)?
- Does the paper follow a clear structure (and is this structure outlined and explained)?
- Are there indications of the student having read some of the general intros/overview articles, not simply some articles found through random Googling...
- Does the paper show a good mastering of academic writing (references, bibliography, notes)?
- Are there indications of independent work and thinking? (Own questions, own material searched and found and used correctly?)

Grades

For the overall assessment, the grading should follow UiO’s general definitions, which can be found here:

<https://www.uio.no/english/studies/examinations/grading-system/index.html>

A = An excellent performance, clearly outstanding. The candidate demonstrates excellent judgement and a high degree of independent thinking.

B = A very good performance. The candidate demonstrates sound judgement and a very good degree of independent thinking.

C = A good performance in most areas. The candidate demonstrates a reasonable degree of judgement and independent thinking in the most important areas.

D = A satisfactory performance, but with significant shortcomings. The candidate demonstrates a limited degree of judgement and independent thinking.

E = Grade “E” (Sufficient) is given for a performance that meets the minimum criteria, but no more. The candidate demonstrates a very limited degree of judgement and independent thinking.

F = (Fail) A performance that does not meet the minimum academic criteria. The candidate demonstrates an absence of both judgement and independent thinking.

The final grade should reflect the student’s answers to Part A and Part B in a relation of 20:80. For grading, 20 points should correspond to grade “A” in Part A, and 80 points in Part B.

grade / Part	Part A	Part B	A+B	grade / Part
A+	20	80	100	A+
A	19	76	95	A
A-	18	72	90	A-
A/B	17	68	85	A/B
B+	16	64	80	B+
B	15	60	75	B
B-	14	56	70	B-
B/C	13	52	65	B/C
C+	12	48	60	C+
C	11	44	55	C
C-	10	40	50	C-
C/D	9	36	45	C/D
D+	8	32	40	D+
D	7	28	35	D
D-	6	24	30	D-
D/E	5	20	25	D/E
E+	4	16	20	E+
E	3	12	15	E
E-	2	8	10	E-
E/F	1	4	5	E/F
F	0	0	0	F

Examples:

- Candidate X has a weak C (“C-”) in Part A and a strong B (“B+”) in Part B. This candidate earns 10 pts (Part A) + 64 pts (Part B) = 74 pts., corresponding to an overall “B” for both parts taken together.
- Candidate Y answers Part A only slightly above minimum (say “E” = 3 pts), but writes an essay that can qualify as somewhere between “A” and “B” (68 pts), the total sums up to 71 pts, still corresponding to a “B”, though a weaker one.