Comparative Literature Major: Learning Goals

Comparative literature explores literature beyond and across the boundaries of single nations, language and cultures, often in conjunction with the historical, political and social realities that lend life and variety to any art form. It represents a way of approaching literature, rather than a specific body of knowledge about literature. Because comparative literature embraces all of world literature in all periods of history, no one person could possibly embody the field. As a result, the comparative approach is a highly dynamic, interdisciplinary and collaborative endeavor, which is reflected in the diverse interests of our students and faculty.

The Comparative Literature Program’s core course, COML 100a, Comparing Literatures: Theory and Practice, introduces students to the diversity of approaches possible within the field and serves as a jumping-off point for students’ individualized exploration of literature from across the globe, from a wide variety of perspectives. The course also focuses on developing the research and writing skills specific to the comparative study of literature. The major also emphasizes the study of literature and culture in languages other than English. Courses are taught by distinguished faculty from across the humanities at Brandeis.

Comparative literature is inherently multicultural and dynamic. We are constantly shaping our curriculum to fit the interests and needs of the changing student body and encourage student input at all levels of program planning.

Knowledge: Students completing the major in comparative literature will:

1. understand aspects of literature that can or must be studied cross-culturally, such as: genre; the movement of literary ideas across boundaries, including translation; diasporic literatures; and literary movements that span multiple cultures, such as romanticism, modernism and the avant-garde;
2. understand the major questions, concepts, theories and methodologies of comparative literature as a discipline;
3. achieve solid proficiency in at least one language other than English, to the level needed to work with original texts in at least two linguistically distinct literary traditions.

Core Skills: Comparative literature majors will develop the capacity to:

1. perform strong and revealing close analyses of literary texts;
2. employ the conceptual tools and insights of literary theoretical texts to read critically and interpret texts drawn from various literary genres, literary criticism, historical materials, and literary theory itself;
3. use various interpretive approaches, considering the benefits and limitations of different strategies;
4. use library resources to find relevant research materials;
5. construct a logical, well-supported argument about a comparative literary problem by identifying and articulating a compelling and productive comparative question about literature and synthesizing relevant critical literature;
6. present such comparative arguments in clear and engaging academic prose.
Social Justice: Cultural forms and ideas move across borders, now perhaps more than ever; the comparative literature program emphasizes the importance of cultural literacy and sensitivity to cultural difference both within individual societies and in the global context. The curriculum provides graduates with knowledge and perspectives needed to appreciate and respect the diversity of literary expression around the world, as well as the shared human urge toward artistic expression in language, whether oral or written. Comparative literature majors will be prepared to participate in multicultural and global conversations by asking questions, listening closely and responding productively, in the collaborative spirit of the field.

Upon Graduating: A Brandeis student with a comparative literature major will be prepared to use the knowledge and skills gained from the sustained comparative study of literatures and cultures to pursue professional training and a range of careers that demand a global perspective or a knowledge of and appreciation for diverse cultures, including those in academics, government, non-governmental organizations and non-profits, and international business.

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Submitted 15 December 2010
Revised 25 January 25, 2011