

LIBS 101
The Human Enigma: An Overview

As your introduction to Liberal Studies, this course is the first step on an exploration of the many ways in which humans live together. It is also an investigation of the ways in which humans describe and explain the worlds in which they live. Since the sources for much of our thinking in the “west” is found in Homeric and Classical Greek thought, we will return throughout the semester to the Greeks. We will read dramatic, historical, scientific, mythic, philosophic and many other kinds of accounts in which the Greeks as well as people from other times and places describe their social and cosmological worlds. We will also turn the lens on the present and look at accounts of the many worlds in which humans currently live. Building on the vehicles of Greek tragedy, contemporary novels, ancient epic, current journalistic accounts, among many others, we will investigate some of the social modes in which people inside and outside of the U.S., and outside of the Judeo-Christian world, have described their lives and beliefs. In finding out what people from other times, other places and other cultures have thought about themselves and the world, we will move between past and present societies, between models of the cosmos that seem alien or familiar to us. As a result we may begin to compose new, more complex, portraits of ourselves.

The course is organized around some of these central themes and questions: How have people made sense out of their worlds? How do people in various societies settle disputes? How do we, now, in the current United States? What are the origins of government and written laws? How have members of social groups defined justice and responsible citizenship? How are myths both ancient and modern? Is science a contemporary way of making sense? How do people come to believe that they are civilized and others are not? What is foreign? How do people who are all quite different from one another live together? How does art address the disorderly and irrational? What do people now in the United States who are serious about these questions do?

Through the materials, seminars, symposiums and films of this course, you will begin to lay the foundations of a liberal education. By the end of the course you may feel that the human being is as much an enigma as ever, but you should have a richer understanding of the complexities that make us enigmatic.