B.A. (Honours) in Contemporary English Studies

Course Title : English in Popular Song
Course Code : ENG3388 / ENG1373
Recommended Study Year : 2nd & 3rd Year for 3-year system
                       : 1st & 3rd & 4th Year for 4-year system
No. of Credits/Term : 3
Mode of Tuition : Lecture/Tutorial/Workshop
Class Contact Hours : 2 hours Lecture/week
                       : 1 hour Tutorial/week
Category in Major Programme : Disciplinary Elective
                               : Free Elective for 1st Year Arts Students
Prerequisite(s) : N/A
Co-requisite(s) : N/A
Exclusion(s) : N/A
Exemption Requirement(s) : N/A

Brief Course Description

This course is designed as an introduction to English language song across a range of periods, genres, styles and topics. From the 20th century onwards English has become the major international language for song writing and listening. However, the close relationship between song and poetry in earlier centuries will provide a starting point and songs in Shakespeare plays will be heard and explored. Folk ballads and folk songs will also be read and listened to in order to arouse critical interest and discussion. Poet-songwriters such as Robert Burns will be introduced in order to encourage discussion on the correspondences between song and poem. Later song styles and forms will also be experienced and discussed in the course, with an emphasis on more recent and contemporary literary singer-songwriters of the 20th and early 21st centuries from Cole Porter and Muddy Waters to significant artists of today such as Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Stevie Wonder, Paul Simon, David Bowie, Alanis Morrisette, Jack Johnson, Alicia Keys, k.d. Laing, Eminem and Lady Gaga. Popular song genres and styles from jazz to rock and to rap and familiar stage musical songs (e.g. Lloyd Webber’s and Rice’s ‘Cats’ based on Eliot’s poems) will be presented and discussed. The relationship between musical melody and song lyrics will be listened to and lyrical devices and sonic effects will also be studied. The influence of music video (MTV style) will be considered in relation to word-image juxtaposition. Students will have the opportunity to present favourite songwriters and songs in their presentation and sharing assignment. No musical experience or knowledge is required, only an open mind and a ready ear (or better still, two).

Aims

1. to familiarize students with a wider range of song genres, song themes and song styles
2. to develop a critical faculty in listening to and evaluating songs, singers and their subject matter
3. to promote dialogue and discussion on English language arts in relation to popular culture and awareness of cultural references
4. to promote understanding, enjoyment and aesthetic appreciation of English language songs from a range of periods, particularly related to contemporary life
5. to consider critically the relationship between song as a form and its literary and social connections and context

**Learning Outcomes**

This course is designed to elicit from the student an appreciation of various ways of listening, sometimes from more than one point of view, and of understanding a range of thematic references. By the end of the course students will be expected to be able to:

1. select and apply the techniques of text analysis to a broad range of song texts, and be able to interpret and inference in their listening and reading
2. identify similarities, differences and connections between song texts, justifying their arguments appropriately
3. appraise and evaluate the song texts studied (whether selected by the instructor or self-selected) within the context of the course themes and ideas
4. compare and contrast the cultural and historical factors pertaining to the songs and the social environment in which they were produced
5. formulate coherent arguments in both spoken and written form
6. create a short piece of recorded performance OR creative writing of song lyrics (original or by adapting an existing song) working collaboratively

**Indicative Content**

The course will include a study of the following:

1. A brief introductory history of English popular song
2. Introduction to song genres, e.g. ballads; jazz; folk; gospel; rap; rock; rhythm and blues; stage musical songs; styles e.g. amatory songs (love songs)
3. The relationship between lyrics and music; diction and song subjects/themes.
4. Biographical and social contexts from which the selected songs emerged
5. An analysis of structural and formal elements, e.g. verse-refrain, rhythm and metre, rhyme, stress patterns, tropes and images, explicit/implicit meanings (e.g. a song such as Billie Holliday’s ‘Strange Fruit’) in relation to the respective texts and themes.
6. Aesthetic taste and poetics of text and performance, social context and ideology; For example, exploring the socio-political references of songs such as Don McClean’s ‘American Pie’ and Billy Joel’s ‘We Didn’t Light the Fire’ will enable a connection to be made between song and music and its social context.
Teaching Method

The course consists partly of lectures by the instructor, in which the modes and techniques of song analysis are demonstrated, but also includes workshops and tutorials which enable the student to discuss more informally the issues raised in lectures and work collaboratively and independently on their presentations and blog reviews.

Measurement of Learning Outcomes

Outcomes 1-5: presentations, blog, term paper, tutorial participation, quiz-test
Outcome 6: Creative group work outside classroom

Assessment

Continuous assessment: 100%
1) Song presentation; compare and contrast two songs either live or recorded song (pair oral assessment); presentation – analysis and discussion 15%
2) Moodle blog review of selected 10 songs, covering a range of periods, styles, genres (individual); comparing, contrasting and evaluating the chosen songs 20%
3) Sharing a song performance with adapted lyrics; leading a seminar discussion on the outcome (group assessment) 15%
4) End-of-term test/quiz on terms, themes and topics, context and social relevance 25%
5) Term paper on a negotiated topic relating to two or more songs/singers studied on the course (1,600 words approx.) 25%

Required Readings


Recommended Readings


Recommended Viewing

Luhrmann, B. Director. Moulin Rouge, 2003

Supplementary Readings

There will be lecture notes and directed readings from the media and internet sources plus a selection of articles and reviews that are appropriate to the level of the course which will be made available on the university intranet. Students are encouraged to read magazines and websites concerned with popular song in English across a broad spectrum of genres.