

Comparative Literature Faculty

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Christian Thorne, *English*

Janneke van de Stadt, *Russian*

Ricardo Wilson, *English*

What is Comparative Literature?

Williams has a vibrant and exciting program in Comparative Literature, characterized by a range of course offerings and by an energetic and collegial group of faculty who cooperate across departments to support the program.

Comparative Literature at Williams involves the study of literature from multiple cultural traditions in order to appreciate the variety, the complexity, and the breadth of what literature can be and do. Our courses are geared to students who are interested in literature and culture and who want exposure to a range of texts and cultures from both inside and outside the English-speaking world: from Imperial Russia to contemporary Latin America, from Victorian London to postmodern Tokyo. The critical approaches we use link us with a wide range of other disciplines, including art, anthropology, history, and psychology, to name a few. And the program emphasizes critical thinking and writing skills that serve students across departments and divisions.

What kinds of courses can I take?

Courses listed in the Comparative Literature section of the course catalog cover a wide range of texts and cultures: from the Russian novel to Chinese poetry, from the Qur'an to American film. There are also courses that read different kinds of "texts," like fashion, museums, or the mass media. Classes are typically small, and students receive close attention from professors who work to meet their individual intellectual interests.

Do I have to know a foreign language?

Not necessarily. Many of our students study foreign languages and read literature in the original language, but most courses in Comparative Literature are taught entirely in English, and many have no prerequisites.

Further information: contact the program chair, Sarah Allen: sma4@williams.edu

Comparative Literature

2022
2023

Comparative Literature at Williams

Students motivated by a desire to study literary art in the broadest sense of the term will find an intellectual home in the Program in Comparative Literature. Comparative Literature gives students the opportunity to develop their critical faculties through the analysis of literature across cultures, and through the exploration of literary and critical theory. By crossing national, linguistic, historical, and disciplinary boundaries, students of Comparative Literature learn to read texts for the ways they make meaning, the assumptions that underlie that meaning, and the aesthetic elements evinced in the making. Students in Comparative Literature are encouraged to examine the widest possible range of literary communication, including the metamorphosis of media, genres, forms, and themes.

Whereas specific literature programs allow the student to trace the development of one literature in a particular culture over a period of time, Comparative Literature juxtaposes the writings of different cultures and epochs in a variety of ways. Because interpretive methods from other disciplines play a crucial role in investigating literature's larger context, Comparative Literature offers courses intended for students in all divisions of the college and of all interests. These include courses that introduce students to the comparative study of world literature and courses designed to enhance any foreign language major in the Williams curriculum. In addition, Comparative Literature offers courses in literary theory that illuminate the study of texts of all sorts.

Note: the English Department allows students to count one course with a COMP prefix as an elective within the English major.

Comparative Literature Courses

2022–2023

Fall

- COMP 101 Greek Literature: Performance, Conflict & Desire
- COMP 111 Nature of Narrative
- COMP 117 Introduction to Cultural Theory
- COMP 151 The Art of Playing: An Introduction to Theatre and Performance
- COMP 166 Being Muslim, Being American: American Muslim Literature in the 21st century
- COMP 202 Modern Drama
- COMP 215 Cults of Personality (*tutorial*)
- COMP 230 The Renaissance in England and the European Continent: Self and World
- COMP 234 Saharan Imaginations
- COMP 260 Francophone Graphic Novels
- COMP 293 Great Big Books
- COMP 296 Chinese Film and Its Significant Others
- COMP 301 Sublime Confusion: A Survey of Literary and Critical Theory
- COMP 305 Dostoevsky and the Meaning of Life
- COMP 308 Building Francophone Cities: Literature, Art & History
- COMP 324 Japanese Art & Visual Culture: Private/Public/Pop (*tutorial*)
- COMP 327 Romanticism, Belatedly
- COMP 332 Pop Culture in the Arab World: Youth, Populism & Politics

Spring

- COMP 106 Temptation
- COMP 108 Roman Literature: Gender, Virtue, Empire
- COMP 111 The Nature of Narrative
- COMP 133 Plantation and the Plot: the Poetics of Caribbean Economic Thought and Struggle
- COMP 204 To See the Past: Russian and Soviet Cinema on History
- COMP 208 Through the Looking Glass: Comparative Children's Literature
- COMP 209 Translating French: An Introduction to Theory and Practice
- COMP 210 Latina/o/x Language Politics: Hybrid Voices
- COMP 219 *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité?* Race, Gender, and Political Power in Eighteenth-Century France
- COMP 223 Japanese Food Culture in a Global Context
- COMP 242 Americans Abroad
- COMP 244 Black Mediterranean
- COMP 255 Love & Death in Modern Japanese Literature and Visual Culture
- COMP 256 Stop Making Sense: Absurd(ist) Theatre in Historical Context (*tutorial*)
- COMP 265 Theories of Language and Literature
- COMP 284 Athletics and Literature in Ancient Greece
- COMP 285 The Nature of Work
- COMP 295 Utopia and the Idea of America(s)
- COMP 297 Present Pasts: The Politics of Memory in Contemporary Chinese Literatures and Films (*tutorial*)
- COMP 317 Dante
- COMP 320 Kafka (*tutorial*)
- COMP 334 Imagining Joseph
- COMP 350 Separation: An Introduction to Postcolonial Literature
- COMP 361 Repairing a Broken World: Introduction to North African Contemporary Art
- COMP 366 Joyce, Woolf, and Proust
- COMP 369 Indigenous Narratives: From the Fourth World to the Global South
- COMP 414 Coming of Age: French and Francophone Childhood and Adolescent Film
- COMP 483 Representing History

Major Requirements

The Comparative Literature major consists of nine courses in literature (broadly conceived) or relevant theoretical approaches, and a Senior Portfolio (COMP 490; thesis-writers substitute COMP 494). All Comparative Literature majors are required to take COMP 111: The Nature of Narrative. Students considering the major are strongly encouraged to take COMP 111 in their first or second year (in exceptional circumstances, a student may substitute an upper-level course with the approval of the Comp Lit Advisory Committee). Five or more of the remaining courses must include, as at least half of their content, material originally written in a language other than English (non-English texts may be read in the original language or in translation) OR be heavily focused on comparison across different media. Note that courses not carrying the COMP prefix may also be eligible for major credit. Two of the courses taken for the major must be designated as Writing Skills courses and two must be at the 300-level or above.

The Senior Portfolio

The Senior Portfolio is an assembly of the student's work that explores their intellectual development through the course of their study of Comparative Literature. The student will select three pieces of work from previous courses taken for the major and tie them together through an eight-to-ten-page unifying essay or other creative project. There are a range of possibilities for this aspect of the portfolio, including more traditional analytic essays, and other forms of creative artistic expression (fiction, poetry, visual arts, etc.). For thesis writers, the thesis replaces the Senior Portfolio. Majors will present their Senior Portfolios during a symposium in their final spring semester. Students should select a Senior Portfolio advisor and submit an initial proposal to the advisor and to the chair in the semester preceding (fall semester of senior year for students graduating in June, and fall semester of junior year for students graduating in December), and must enroll in COMP 490 in their final spring semester.

Honors

Honors candidates in Comparative Literature are required to have maintained a GPA of 3.5 in the major to qualify for submitting a thesis proposal. In addition, candidates must demonstrate a strong interest in a specific topic for which an appropriate faculty advisor will be available in the senior year. See the section on Comparative Literature in the current Course Catalogue and on our college webpage for details about the honors thesis.