

Integrating Humility in the English Classroom

Application for Newell Innovative Teaching Award, Fall 2025

ENG 201: World Literature I

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I. Project Description

In the Spring of 2025 I attended a conference at Notre Dame oriented around integrating the virtues into the college classroom. We discussed the nature of the virtues and why they would be valuable in the classroom, but the method of integration was left up to us. Inspired by this conference, I resolved to integrate discussion and practice of the virtue of humility into one of the core courses I teach regularly: World Literature I. My goal was to help students understand humility more deeply as well as to encourage them to adopt practices that would enable them to be more humble in their everyday lives.

I chose humility as a focus for the class for several reasons. In the first place, I wanted a virtue I was interested in improving in my own life. I hoped to share in my students' development. Second, it seemed to me that the virtue of humility synchronized well with many of the texts we would be studying over the semester. *Antigone* is perhaps a test-case for the need for humility among leaders, and the early epic hero Gilgamesh experiences growth in humility and wisdom over the course of his story.

Furthermore, since this course spans literature from before the time of Christ to after, we as a class could trace the development of humility as an aspirational virtue as it influenced the literature. Prior to Christ, humility was more likely a defect than a virtue. Aristotle, for instance, regards humility as appropriate for slaves and women, but not for the ruling class of men he taught. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book II, ch. 7) Aristotle writes, "With regard to honour and dishonour the mean is proper pride, the excess is known as a sort of 'empty vanity', and the deficiency is undue humility." In other words, virtue is found in an appropriate level of pride, one fitting to one's station and abilities. Humility is a kind of mistaken lowering of oneself further than is just. Some ancient thinkers like Socrates will advocate for what we might call intellectual humility, that is, admitting that one does not know and being willing to learn from others. This is the key to wisdom, after all. But the radical humility demonstrated by Christ was a new and very difficult pill to swallow in a world heavily influenced by Greek and Roman thought. So by focusing on humility, we were able to trace the influence of this revolution in virtue in the literature we read. Works like Dante's *Inferno* or Milton's *Paradise Lost* would be nonsensical without a robust understanding of the value of humility.

It seems to me that the innovation of this course is in the focus on a practical virtue that is not immediately tied to academic success. I have taught in a variety of educational institutions, many of them Christian, but in none of them was I expected or required to help my students become more virtuous. Humility does not necessarily make one a better scholar, and yet as Aquinas tells us, humility is a necessary first step to receive all God's good gifts. By helping my students be more humble, I am hopeful that I am also helping them be better prepared to receive the truths offered in my course and beyond.

In addition, for a Christian institution like Union, helping our students think consciously about their own moral character seems consistent with our desire to form students as whole persons, and not merely as thinking machines. We are encouraged to help our students' spiritual formation in our classes, but this can often be a difficult task, not least because it is so hard to practically define. Focusing on the virtues seems to me a helpful middle way between merely teaching academics in the classroom and turning my class into a Sunday school. To be sure, the virtues are not the heart of Christianity. But they can be a helpful scaffold that enables students to more fully embrace both the academic truths of the classroom and the spiritual truths of the life of faith. In this way, the virtues are a practical way to help integrate faith and learning.

II. Methods

I did my best not to add too much to the course workload as I incorporated our study of humility. In addition to the usual reading for the class, I distributed short passages from Josef Pieper, C.S. Lewis, and Richard Foster to help my students think more deeply about humility as a virtue. It was important for that class that we avoid the error of dwelling on our own sins and errors as a means of achieving humility. I wanted to challenge the class to understand humility as something compatible with daring and achieving great success. From these authors we learned that humility is not found in self-abasement but in focusing on others, beginning with God and proceeding to our neighbors. Lewis paints a picture of a truly humble man who is able to create a great work and know it as a great work but take no more pleasure in the work than if someone else had made it. I wanted my students to recognize that humility does not mean they

cannot recognize the goodness of what they achieve. In addition to these short readings, distributed over the first few weeks of class, I began on the first day with a lecture designed to help students begin to examine some misconceptions about humility and encourage their reflections on the presence or absence of humility in their lives.

Then, I had students complete four short writing assignments, spaced out over the semester, to encourage their reflection and integration on humility. The first assignment asked them simply to write about someone in their lives that they felt displayed humility well. I asked them to tell a short story about this person's humility and then reflect on how they thought being more humble themselves might change their day-to-day lives.

Next, following the reading from Richard Foster, I asked students to think of at least two practical ways they could practice humility in each of seven categories Foster outlines. I had students print out these lists of ideas and bring them to class. I then had students tape up their lists around the classroom and invited the class to walk around and peruse everyone else's list. I encouraged them to leave positive notes when they saw an idea that was particularly fresh or compelling. I wanted to avoid a sense of competition over who could be the most humble and encourage students to be other-centered in their evaluations of these practices. After this, I asked students to choose one or two practical ways they could practice humility daily based on the ideas they had generated and seen.

Midway through the semester, I had students write a short paper on the virtue of humility as they saw it reflected (or absent) in one of the works of literature we studied. I wanted to help students see humility not as something extra tacked on to the classroom but as a virtue that could inform our thinking on the literature itself. Conversely, I hoped that the literature might also help my students to recognize and practice humility more fully.

Finally, at the end of the semester, I asked students to reflect on their semester of practicing humility. In another short paper, I had students write about a particular time their practice of humility was challenging or became evident in a special way. I asked them to think as well about how their practice may have affected those around them.

One last alteration to my class was to have students keep a “commonplace book” rather than a reading journal. The commonplace book was meant to be a place where students could record beautiful, inspiring, or truthful quotations from the literature we read so as to practice admiration of the gifts of others and thus encourage our own humility.

III. Results

I was pleased, and a bit overwhelmed with how eagerly my students jumped on these assignments. More than a few wrote that they had already been convicted of their need for humility so that the course design felt like an affirmation of their pursuit of greater virtue. It was truly a pleasure to read their reflections which were almost universally heartfelt and frequently inspiring. If nothing else, this focus on humility helped me to appreciate my students more.

Both sections of the class subjectively seemed more engaged and focused during our meeting times. It often occurred that I or the students would point out some issue of humility or pride that organically arose in our discussions of the literature, and the focus on the virtue seemed to help my students see literature not merely as old stories but as texts that make ethical and moral claims which we must wrestle with as good readers.

When I teach the class again, I do plan to make a few changes, however. I will probably substitute our readings of Genesis for Job early in the semester. As a meditation on humility, Job is unmatched, and I regret leaving it off the syllabus last year. I also need to clarify my expectations around the commonplace book, which seemed to devolve into reflective journal entries as the semester proceeded. I am also contemplating focusing on a different virtue for my World Literature II classes that might build on the virtue of humility while still being accessible to students who haven't taken me for World Lit. I.