



# WORLD LITERATURE I (ENG 251)

## Arabian Nights Study Guide

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### THE WORLD OF THE ARABIAN NIGHTS

The stories come from India, Persia and Arabia; there are even stories from China, such as Aladdin, in some editions. These stories all reflect the enormous, highly civilized Islamic world of the ninth to thirteenth centuries. It stretched from Spain across North Africa to Cairo, across the Arabian peninsula, up to Damascus and Baghdad, further north to Samarkand, across what is now Afghanistan, down into India, and beyond. Many of the people in this huge area shared a religion, Islam, a religious language, the Arabic of the Koran, and many cultural elements which derived from the Koranic culture of Islam and its seventh century roots in the Arabian peninsula, now mostly Saudi Arabia.

A traveler could wander across this huge region speaking Arabic, sharing in a familiar culture, studying and praying in mosques, and trading with fellow Muslims. A wonderful travel book was written by Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century recording his travels of about 77,000 miles, from Morocco across North Africa, through Arabia, up through Persia, the Steppes of Central Asia, across what is now Afghanistan, through India, perhaps up to China, and back again in many slow loops. Ibn Battuta, the Arabic Marco Polo, was able to travel all this distance almost entirely within the sphere of Islamic culture.

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### THE VARIETY OF THE ARABIAN NIGHTS

The Arabian Nights is hugely various, like the lands it came from, and it is jam-packed with spiritual as well as earthly values. It includes information on what life is like and how to live it in a world full of tyrannical as well as good rulers, magicians and witches, good and bad jinnis (or demons), plentiful sex, lots of violence and mystical spiritual quests.

The Arabian Nights are not just Arabic, but Persian and Indian as well, so perhaps a better name for them is simply The Nights, one of the world's great collections of stories. The Nights are a wonderful example of Folk literature and how it develops, through the telling and retelling of stories over a long period of time. There were many creators of these stories, many re-tellers, and many rewriters. There are, consequently, many different texts of the Nights, and stories were added to the Nights for many centuries. The stories are called the Thousand and One Nights to express the idea of a large number, not necessarily exactly 1001.

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### FRAME STORIES OF THE ARABIAN NIGHTS

The stories in the Nights are like a complex set of interlocking arguments and examples, each fitting more or less well into its

frame and doing a more or less successful job of proving its point as well as entertaining. The main frame creates the setting and motivation for all the stories contained in the Nights:

#### I. Two brother kings, Shahrayar and Shahzaman

A. Shahzaman is cuckolded by his wife

B. Shahrayar is cuckolded by his wife.

C. They travel until they meet the Jinni (demon) who keeps his wife locked up in a glass chest, yet she still manages to cuckold him.

D. They return to their kingdoms and Shahrayar has his wife killed, and vows to marry a new wife each night and kill her the next morning, so she can't cheat on him.

E. Shahrazad tells her father she will marry Shahrayar.

1. Father tells her The Tale of the Ox and the Donkey to dissuade her. Not successful.

2. Father tells her The Tale of the Merchant and His Wife to dissuade her. Not successful.

F. Shahrazad marries Shahrayar, and arranges for her sister, Dinarzad, to ask her to tell a story to pass the night. This story, and many more, will save her and deliver the people.

1. Story of the Merchant and the Demon

a. Story of the First Old Man and the Deer

b. Story of the Second Old Man and Two Dogs

c. Story of the Third Old Man.

These three stories are successful and persuade the demon to release the merchant.

2. Story of the Fisherman. And so on until eventually the King forgives women, accepts his marriage to Shahrazad as permanent, and all live happily ever after. The stories have been successful in curing the King and saving the people.

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## TEXTS AND VERSIONS OF THE NIGHTS

Because the Nights developed out of an oral tradition, there are many texts and versions of the Nights available. If you wish to read more than is included in the Norton Anthology, the best current translation is that by Haddawy, which is also published by Norton. Although the Haddawy translation includes only a small portion of the total stories sometimes found in editions of the Nights, the translation is new, attractive, has a good introduction, and avoids the ugly racism of the more standard nineteenth century Richard Burton translation. The Burton translation, although it includes many more stories, is so marred by the racial stereotyping in it, that I cannot recommend it. You may, if you wish, read one of the editions translated by Burton instead of the Haddawy version, but be warned, it is indeed racist in its negative stereotyped descriptions of black people.

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## THE ISSUE OF RACE IN THE NIGHTS

In the Arabic stories of the Nights, as opposed to the Burton translation, the issue of race is not that of modern racism. Although it does seem that when a woman has illicit sex, it is with a black slave, and some bad jinnis are black, there are also plenty of white slaves in the stories and jinnis come in various colors. Indeed, the mystic color symbolism of some Islamic Sufis includes Black Light as the second most sacred color, only exceeded by emerald, the color of Eternal Life.

Historically, there were plenty of black non-slaves who had positions of importance in the Muslim world of the Nights. Further, the children of a man and his slaves or concubines were free citizens and potential heirs, regardless of color. The son of a king

and his black slave concubine could become the next king. So, although the Nights describe a world that includes slavery and some negative images about blacks, these need to be examined in the context of the Nights, not as if they were expressions of modern western values, while no such explanation is adequate for the Burton translation.

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## ROLES OF WOMEN IN THE NIGHTS

The roles of women in the Nights are especially interesting. On the one hand, there are many female slaves and concubines who must obey the men who own them. On the other hand, it is the courage and wit of Shahrazad that heals the King's insane distrust of women and saves the remaining virgins of her city from being killed. There are faithful women and faithless women, magical women and silly women. Their many roles and kinds are not those of the modern western world, but they have their own strengths and weaknesses and deserve to be looked at for what they are, not simply as victims of men who control them, although that too is a factor.

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## THE POWER OF KINGS IN THE NIGHTS

The power of kings and other rulers in the Nights is frightening. Shahrayar is able to marry and kill a new virgin each night for as long as he pleases. As ruler, he makes the rules, and no one can oppose him and survive. There is not the least suggestion of democratic representation; this is a world where the ruler, in a sense, OWNS the land and people he rules. The king can save or kill the people, give away lands and their inhabitants, claim young women as his wives and concubines, in short, do whatever he pleases, while his subjects can either agree or keep silent.

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## THE STORY OF THE FRAME OF THE NIGHTS

There are two brothers, Shahrayar and Shahzaman. Shahrayar rules India and Indo-China, and he gives Samarkand to his younger brother, Shahzaman, to rule. After Shahzaman has been in Samarkand for ten years, his older brother, Shahrayar longs to see him, so he sends his Visier (his chief administrator) to his brother to ask him to come and visit.

The Visier travels to Samarkand to invite Shahzaman to visit his brother in India. The Visier camps with his retinue outside the city. King Shahzaman goes to the camp to visit with the Visier, BUT, unknown to his wife, the Queen, he returns to his palace in the middle of the night. Shahzaman finds his Queen in bed with the cook, and becomes so enraged that he kills them both with his sword. He says nothing of this to anyone, and leaves with the Visier to visit his brother, Shahrayar.

One day, while Shahrayar is out hunting, Shahzaman stays in the palace feeling very depressed about his dead wife. He looks out at the garden and sees his brother's wife enter the garden with twenty slave girls, ten white and ten black. They undress and prove to be ten men and ten women, who proceed to have sex together, while another slave, Mas'ud, jumps down from a tree when the Queen calls to him and they have sex. Then they all re-garb as slave girls, except for Mas'ud who jumps back over the wall and is gone.

Shahzaman marvels that his fate is not so bad as his brother's, and consequently he feels much better.

When Shahrayar returns, he notices that his brother is more cheerful and asks why. Shahzaman tells him and Shahrayar insists on seeing his Queen deceiving him. This is done and he is enraged and suggests to his brother that they leave the kingdom and seek a lover who is even MORE unfortunate than they are. Only if they find him will they return home.

They travel to the sea shore where they hear a great commotion. A black pillar emerges from the sea until it touches the clouds. It is a huge demon carrying a glass chest locked with four padlocks. The demon wades to shore and stops under the tree where the two brothers are hiding. He unlocks the glass chest and pulls out a beautiful woman. He places her under the tree, puts his head in her lap, and goes to sleep. The woman looks up and notices the two kings hiding in the tree. She gestures to them to come down or she will wake the demon. Then she insists they make love to her or she will wake the demon. Afterwards, she takes a ring from each brother to add to her collection of 98 rings from 98 other lovers. This shows her scorn for the demon who

has not realized that he cannot control what is pre-destined, or stop a woman from satisfying her desires.

This is indeed worse than the two brothers' situations, so they return to their kingdoms. Shahrayar has his Queen killed and he personally kills all his slave girls. He then swears to marry a new woman each night and have her killed the next day, so she will not be able to betray him. And this is just what he does for quite a while.

Shahrazad tells her father, the Vizier, that she wants to marry the king and try to save more women from being killed. Her father gets very angry and says that what happened to the donkey and the ox will happen to her. And what is that, she asks?

Now the Vizier tells the first sub-story of the Nights, to convince Shahrazad that she should not marry the king. This sub-story is about a donkey that persuaded an ox to stop feeding and act sick in order to avoid working. Unfortunately for the donkey, the ox's owner, a merchant, understood animal language and tricked the donkey by making him do the ox's work, so the donkey suffered while the ox had an easy life. This is not a very close analogy to Shahrazad's situation, so she rejects the moral of the story and insists that she must marry the king.

The Visier then warns her that unless she desists from her plan, he'll do to her what the merchant did to his wife. Shahrazad asks, what was that? This introduces the second substory. When the merchant's wife realizes he understands animal language, she **INSISTS** he tell her what the donkey and the ox were saying. The merchant refuses, objecting that he will die if he tells. But, she insists and he prepares to tell her and die. However, he overhears a rooster who says that he, the merchant, is foolish because he can't control one wife, while the rooster controls fifty wives. The rooster recommends that the merchant beat his wife until she stops trying to get him to tell her the animal language. This proves a successful ploy, and the merchant gains control of his wife and doesn't die, because he refuses to reveal the animal language.

**BUT**, Shahrazad refuses to accept the message of this tale, because it, like the Vizier's first tale, offers a weak analogy to her situation. She is no nagging wife to be beaten, nor is the Vizier in danger of death from her marrying the King; she is the one putting herself in danger. The Vizier's attempts to dissuade Shahrazad by telling stories have failed, and she insists on marrying the King.

Shahrazad then tells her little sister, Dinarzad, that she will send for her on her wedding night and Dinarzad should then ask Shahrazad to tell a story "and it will cause the king to stop his practice, save myself, and deliver the people."

This is the great power of wonderful stories, when told well and for a good purpose. They will cure the King, save Shahrazad's life, and free the kingdom from the terror of having its young women killed night after night.

Shahrazad duly marries the King and summons her sister to her bedchamber, where Dinarzad asks her to tell a story. This starts the series of Shahrazad's stories, many of which include other stories within stories, like a set of interlocking puzzle boxes.

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## THE STORY OF THE FIRST NIGHT

The First Night is the story of the Merchant and the Demon. A traveling merchant stops to rest and eat. He tosses date pits onto the ground, washes, and says his prayers. Suddenly there appears an old demon, sword in hand, feet on the ground and head in the clouds, who says "I must kill you as you killed him," because one of the date pits the merchant tossed away struck the demon's son and killed him. This is the justice of the pre-Islamic law of "blood for blood," no matter what the intentions of the people involved.

The Merchant replies with Muslim piety: "To God we belong and to God we return. There is no power or strength save in God the Almighty, the Magnificent. If I killed him, I did it by mistake. Please forgive me." But the Demon is of the old school of pre-Islamic law, and replies, "By God, I must kill you, as you killed my son." This, of course, parallels the situation of the King who is killing a woman every night to punish a woman long dead--it is punishment without determining guilt. The pious merchant pleads, but the demon insists he **MUST** kill him.

Dawn comes, and Shahrazad stops the story right in the middle, but says she'll tell an even better story if the king lets her live until the next night. He agrees, wanting to hear the end of the story, after which he will kill her.

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## THE STORY OF THE SECOND NIGHT

The Demon agrees to let the merchant go home and put his affairs in order. The merchant swears to God that he will return on New Year's Day. The demon accepts this because they both believe in the same God, even though the merchant is Muslim and the demon is from an earlier time and accepts an earlier law.

True to his word, the merchant puts his affairs in order and returns on New Year's Day. As he waits for the demon to come and kill him, an old man appears with a deer on a leash, hears the merchant's story and says he will stay until he sees the outcome.

Dawn comes and Shahrazad stops telling her story. The intrigued King agrees to let her live yet another day to tell the rest of it.

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#### THE STORY OF THE THIRD NIGHT

Another old man with two black dogs arrives, hears the merchant's story, and says he'll stay to see the outcome.

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#### THE STORY OF THE FOURTH NIGHT

The demon appears and the first old man asks him if he will release one third of the merchant's guilt if the old man can tell the demon a strange and wonderful story. The demon agrees and the first old man tells his tale.

He had a barren wife for thirty years and then he took a mistress who bore a son. His wife was jealous and, while the man was away, turned his mistress into a cow and the son into a bull. When the man returned, he was told that his mistress had died and his son had run away.

On a feast day, at his wife's insistence, the old man sacrificed the cow, although the cow wept and otherwise behaved oddly. But, it proved only skin and bones, when dead, so at his wife's insistence, he was going to sacrifice the bull, but it threw itself at his feet and behaved pathetically.

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#### THE STORY OF THE FIFTH NIGHT

The old man refused to kill the bull and sent him to live with a shepherd, whose daughter saw through the enchantment. She changed him back into a man after his father agreed to marry the bull/son to her. She also changed the evil wife into a pretty deer, the very deer the old man had with him on a leash.

The demon agrees that this is a strange and amazing tale, and grants one third of the merchant's life. The second old man, with the two dogs, then says that his story is even more strange and amazing and the demon agrees to grant one third of the merchant's life if the story proves to be so.

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#### THE STORY OF THE SIXTH NIGHT

The second old man tells the story of himself and his two brothers who squandered away their wealth each time he helped them to get on their feet. Finally, they persuaded him to go on a trading voyage.

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## THE STORY OF THE SEVENTH NIGHT

They arrived at their destination, sold their goods at a nice profit, and the man telling the story met a girl dressed in tatters. She asked for a favor and he agreed. The favor was that he would marry her, and she added that she would reward him for his "kindness and charity." He felt pity for her and "guided by what God the Most High had intended for me, I consented." This displayed his virtues of trust in God and belief in Destiny or predestination, a frequent theme in the Nights.

On the voyage home, the two brothers became jealous and tossed him and his new wife overboard. The wife turned into a she-demon and carried him to safety on an island, saying, "Husband, I have rewarded you by saving you from drowning, for I am one of the demons who believe in God...." This is the second pious demon we have encountered in the Nights so far. She wanted to kill the evil brothers, but her husband refused, so she flew him to his home, where he found the two dogs waiting.

The Demon whose son was killed by the merchant's date pit agrees that the story is indeed strange and amazing and grants another third of the man's life to the second old man.

The third old man then asks if the demon will grant the last third of the merchant's life if his story is even more strange and amazing. The story loving demon agrees again to this bargain.

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## THE STORY OF THE EIGHTH NIGHT

The third old man tells the story of his "mule." When the old man had surprised his wife in bed with a slave, his wife turned him (the old man) into a dog. He ran to a butcher shop, where the butcher's daughter recognized that he was a man in dog form. She sprinkled him with magical water and restored him to human form. The old man then asked for a bit of the magical water, which he used to turn his wife into the mule who accompanies him.

The demon, amazed and "swaying with delight," grants the final third of the merchant's life. The demon leaves and the merchant thanks the three old men and then returns home.

Shahrazad remarks that this story was not as strange and amazing as the story of the Fisherman, and her sister says, on cue, "Please, what story?" And Shahrazad begins a new set of stories that will continue for several nights. The king is hooked on her stories by now, and we know they will go on and on.

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## JUSTICE AND FORGIVENESS

This first set of stories is all about justice and forgiveness. The demon is like the king in demanding blood for blood justice, whether or not there is personal guilt involved. Shahrazad is no more responsible for what the king's first wife did than the merchant is for innocently scattering date pits, one of which killed the demon's son. In both cases, a new, better kind of justice must be taught. This is what the stories in the first set do--they teach justice with forbearance. Evil people are turned into deer and dogs, not killed, and the innocent merchant is set free, thanks to the care and charity of the three old men, who may well be allegories of the three revealed religions of the book, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which brought justice to the pagan world of blood guilt.

This world of the Nights is complex, instructive, pious at times and quite bawdy at others. Even this first small chunk of the Nights includes good and bad demons, plenty of sex, including a relationship between a demon and a human woman kept locked in a chest, instructions on how to restore a king to sanity, how to control a wife, how to keep a promise, how to tell stories to out-argue one's father, how a woman can be brave, and so on. Not all the stories are as uplifting as this sequence, but some are even more pious, and most teach about the manners and ethics of survival in a complex, difficult world ruled by capricious tyrants, but ultimately governed by a benevolent God.

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