

Module Title: Why Belgium? Identities, Cultures, Narratives

Module Code: FRE5020

Credit Value: 15

Level: 5

Pre-requisite modules:

Content Description

Uniquely in the UK, this module explores the work of both French- and Dutch-speaking Belgian authors. It focuses on the treatment of identity in novels, short stories, and comics written between the mid-19th and the later 20th centuries. Students taking COM5020 will study all these texts in translation. Students taking FRE5020/6020 will study French texts in the original language, and Dutch texts in translation. Topics covered include war and colonialism; space and place; language; Catholicism; and identity as performance.

Belgium provides an ideal setting for comparative approaches to literature and culture. Its multilingual make-up encourages cross-cultural exchange, while its cities and regions have rich artistic traditions that stretch back far beyond the lifespan of Belgium as an independent nation-state. Yet the literary affiliations between the country's two major linguistic communities, French- and Dutch-speakers, are investigated much more rarely than we might expect. Such neglect is sometimes politically motivated, but very often simply reflects linguistic obstacles. Only recently, as more translations have been published, has genuine comparative study become possible for English-speaking students. This module enables you to take these new opportunities to examine how Belgians think of themselves, each other, and their place in the world.

We begin by studying *Tintin au Congo*, Hergé's often offensive colonialist depiction of the Belgian Congo (1946; 1st ed. 1930). A combination of visual and narrative analysis will show how aspects of the album, and of the nation's past, are intertwined. Via a unique, authentic type of assessment – the ethics review task, on which full guidance will be supplied – you will weigh up the evidence as if you were contributing to the international book trade. We then work on three further set texts in chronological order, alternating between Dutch and French as the original languages. Three short stories from the early career of the prolific Flemish author Hendrik Conscience (1841-44) were translated into English shortly afterwards, in an anthology entitled *Sketches from Flemish Life*. Freely available online, with vivid illustrations that play an integral part in the narratives, these stories set up fascinating conflicts between different elements of identity. Georges Rodenbach's novella *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892), from what has often been seen as a golden age of Francophone Belgian cultural achievement, combines photographic illustrations, Symbolist and Decadent aesthetics, and careful narrative technique: it leaves readers asking questions about mental health, gender, class, religion, and whether a town can be said to have its own identity. Finally, *Wonder* (1962) is in many ways the first truly experimental Flemish novel. Hugo Claus, a prolific and multi-talented figure of genuine world standing, rewrites familiar myths of the hero to explore themes of individual and collective mental health, the seductiveness

of political populism, and the under-acknowledged legacies of wartime collaboration. By working on these texts you will become familiar with aspects of Belgian history and culture that are often overlooked – not only in the English-speaking world, but also by various groups within Belgium itself.

Module Aims

Knowledge outcomes:

- Understanding of Belgian identity, history, and culture
- Understanding of the thematic, formal, and socio-historical issues raised by the representation of Belgian experience
- Familiarity with a range of texts [*for COM5020*: translated texts] from 19th- and 20th-century Belgium

Discipline-specific skills:

- Ability to establish meaningful relationships between the content and style of the texts studied and wider cultural issues
- Ability to compare and contrast texts accurately and pertinently
- Increased awareness of appropriate academic style and terminology

General intellectual attributes:

- Ability to evaluate different critical approaches to texts and culture
- Ability to deploy evidence effectively in support of arguments
- Increased awareness of the shifting and plural nature of social identities