

Literature and the Moral Imagination

PHIL 194W

Instructor: Willie Costello

Winter Quarter. 4 units. Prerequisites: None. Capstone: Philosophy & Literature. WAYS Certification: Ethical Reasoning (ER), Aesthetic & Interpretive Inquiry (AI). Meetings on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 13:30 to 14:50 in Bldg 260 Rm 007. Office hours on Tuesdays from 15:00 to 16:00 in Bldg 100 Rm 102M, or by appointment (email: williec@stanford.edu). Course readings available from bit.ly/phil194w. Course website available through canvas.stanford.edu.

Course description

Literature is often hailed for its ability to expand our moral horizons and make us better, more empathetic people. But is literature *actually* able to do these things? If it is, is it *unique* in its power to do so? How can reading a work of creative *fiction* improve us in *real life*? Can reading literature ever make us *worse*?

This course is an investigation into these and related questions, with special attention given to the ways that literature can (and cannot) engage the moral imagination. Readings will alternate between contemporary philosophical articles on the relation between literature, ethics, and the moral imagination, and classic and contemporary works of literature that engage the moral imagination in different ways. Some background in aesthetics, ethics, and/or the philosophy of literature is preferred, but not required.

Course learning objectives

By the end of this course, you should be able to...

- explain the major philosophical theories of the relation between literature and morality
- apply these theories in the explication of the moral value of actual works of literature
- analyze and evaluate the merits of different theories vis-à-vis one another, both in the abstract and with respect to particular works of literature

- dissect your own and others' intuitions and presuppositions about literature and morality
- research and defend an original thesis dealing with the above topics
- read philosophical and literary texts carefully, charitably, and critically
- critique others' work with respect, charity, and encouragement
- cultivate a personally effective approach to academic research and writing

Course contract

This course is a collaboration between me, you, and your classmates. You will be regularly called upon to actively participate in class discussions and other activities, and your contributions will directly influence what we cover in seminar. **It is not necessary that you agree with everything I or anyone else says in this class, but it is necessary that you always listen and respond with respect.** With this in mind, I put forth the following “course contract”, applying to everyone in the class (students and instructor alike):

- we have the responsibility to **contribute** to the collective learning process (which includes asking questions when we're not understanding something)
- we have the responsibility to **be receptive** to other points of view than our own
- we have the right to **dissent or differ** from the instructor and from others in the class
- we have the responsibility to **welcome challenges** to our own opinions, and be willing to support our claims with further reasons (or be honest when we don't have any)
- we have the right to **personal dignity**, which at no point should be infringed upon in any way by the conduct of others

Texts

The required texts for this course (available for purchase at the Stanford Bookstore) are:

- George Saunders, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (Random House, 9780812987683) – \$16
- Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice* (Beacon, 9780807041093) – \$22
- Ayad Akhtar, *Disgraced* (Back Bay Books, 9780316324465) – \$15
- William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (Penguin, 9780143130222) – \$9
- Henry James, *The Beast in the Jungle* (CreateSpace, 9781461056751) – \$8
- Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge, 9780415854733) – \$25
- Flannery O'Connor, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (Harvest, 9780156364652) – \$15
- Alice Munro, *The Beggar Maid* (Vintage, 9780679732716) – \$16
- Edward Albee, *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* (Dramatists Play Service, 9780822219767) – \$9
- Junot Díaz, *This Is How You Lose Her* (Riverhead, 9781594631771) – \$16

All additional readings can be downloaded from: bit.ly/phil194w

Evaluation

Your grade for the course will be determined by the following components: micro-assignments (informal reading exercises, done at home and submitted before each class meeting); exit tickets (informal writing exercises, done in class and submitted at the end of each class meeting); and a term paper on a topic of your choosing, preceded by a brainstorm assignment, a pitch, a peer review of another student's pitch, a sample page of polished writing, and an in-class presentation. The full grade breakdown is as follows:

<i>Component</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Due date</i>
Micro-assignments	15%	before each class
Exit tickets	9%	during each class
Discussion lead	3%	once during class
Term paper brainstorm	3%	2/4
Term paper pitch (750 words)	10%	2/18
Peer review (750 words)	7%	2/25
Term paper sample page (250 words)	3%	3/4
Term paper presentation (5 minutes)	10%	3/13
Term paper (3000–4000 words)	40%	3/23

- » **Micro-assignments:** Before each class you are to complete an exercise relating to the day's required reading – a “micro-assignment”. The purpose of these micro-assignments is: (a) to deepen your appreciation of the readings; (b) to enhance our classroom discussions of the readings; and (c) to help you develop ideas for your term paper.

Micro-assignments must be completed and submitted on Canvas by 12:00 noon before each class meeting. Micro-assignments submitted after this deadline will receive no credit. **Each micro-assignment counts for 1% of your final grade, up to 15%.** You will have, in total, seventeen opportunities to submit micro-assignments over the course of the term (there is no micro-assignment for the first or the final two classes). This means that **you can skip two micro-assignment without penalty.** (You do not need to tell me when you're choosing not to submit a micro-assignment.) Full credit for micro-assignments is awarded when the student has made a honest attempt to complete the task; determination of this criterion is at the discretion of the instructor.

- » **Exit tickets:** At the end of each class you will be asked to write (on an index card that will be provided to you) a short reflection relating to the day's discussion – an “exit ticket”. The purpose of these exit tickets is: (a) to provide you an opportunity to review and reflect on what you've learned; and (b) to maintain a record of class attendance.

Exit tickets must be handed in to me at the end of each class meeting. You will have, in total, twenty opportunities to hand in exit tickets over the course of the term (one for each class), and each exit ticket counts for 0.5% of your final grade, up to 9%. This means that **you can skip two exit tickets without penalty.** Full credit for exit tickets is awarded when the student has made a honest attempt to respond to the assigned prompt; determination of this criterion is at the discretion of the instructor.

- » **Discussion lead:** Once during term you will be called upon to take my place and lead our in-class discussion. This will involve briefly summarizing the highlights from the day's reading(s), raising some open-ended questions about the readings, and guiding the class in discussing those questions. The day on which you'll do this will be arranged with you in advance. I will model how to do these discussion leads in our first few meetings, before passing the responsibility off to you and your peers. The purpose of these discussion leads is: (a) to give you some practice at leading a discussion, an essential skill for pretty much anyone to have; and (b) to give everyone the benefit of listening to someone other than me lead the day's discussion for a while.
- » **Term paper:** The major assignment for this course is a term paper. This is an opportunity for you to think about a literary work of your choosing and what it tells us about the relation between literature and the moral imagination. Your term paper should be a focused, argumentative essay, between 3000 and 4000 words in length, defending a specific and original thesis about some topic of relevance to the course.
- » **Term paper brainstorm:** A few weeks into term you are to hand in a "brainstorm": a list of (at least three) possible ideas for your term paper. Your brainstorm need be only three bullet points in length, with each bullet point listing a different literary work, accompanied by the philosophical issue that you think that work raises (with respect to the relation between literature and the moral imagination). The purpose of this brainstorm is: (a) to help you come up with ideas for your term paper; and (b) to give you some early guidance on those ideas.
- » **Term paper pitch:** Midway through term you are to hand in a "pitch": a proposal for the topic you intend to explore in your term paper. Your pitch should be at least 750 words in length. It should clearly communicate three things: the scholarly intervention you intend to make, how you will accomplish this, and why anyone else should be interested. Your pitch should not be merely an outline of your term paper. The purpose of this pitch is: (a) to give you a head-start on your term paper; and (b) to give you some early feedback on your ideas, so that you have some guidance on how to develop them in the weeks to come.
- » **Peer review:** After submitting your own pitch, you are to write an (anonymous) peer review of another student's (anonymized) pitch. Your peer review should provide constructive, formative

feedback on the pitch you have received, presenting two developed responses to the pitch's thesis. It should be approximately 750 words in length. The purpose of this peer review is: (a) to develop your ability to charitably and constructively respond to others' ideas; and (b) to provide you, in return, with some ideas for how you might think to develop your own pitch.

- » **Term paper sample page:** Towards the end of the quarter, you are to submit a sample page (of approximately 250 words) of polished writing, representing some section of your eventual term paper. (Most likely, the first page of its introduction or of its first proper section.) The purpose of this sample page is: (a) to give you some close and detailed feedback on your writing, before you write your full term paper; and (b) to give you a further head-start on your term paper.
- » **Term paper presentation:** In the final week of class, each of you will give an in-class presentation on the topic of your term paper. The kind of presentation you give is up to you, but most straightforwardly will be a mini-lecture or philosophy talk, approximately 5 minutes in length. The purpose of this presentation is: (a) to give you some practice at communicating philosophical ideas in a condensed, digestible, and engaging manner; (b) to give you the opportunity to share your ideas with others, and to hear about theirs; and (c) to provide you with some more feedback on your ideas, before you finish your term paper.
- » **Your brainstorm, pitch, peer review, sample page, and term paper must be submitted via Canvas by end of day on the day they are due** (or, for all you night owls, by 8 A.M. the following morning at the latest), in PDF format. **Late papers will be docked 5% for each 24 hour period between the due date and when they are handed in** (unless accompanied by valid medical documentation). Late papers may be submitted up to 7 days after the due date; any papers not received by this time will automatically receive a 0. Assignment instructions and formatting guidelines will be provided along with assignment prompt.
- » **In-class participation:** You are expected to be an active participant in our seminar meetings. One (obvious) way to be an active participant is by asking questions and sharing your thoughts with the class; but this is not the only way, nor will it necessarily be the way that works best for you. Other ways to be an active participant include: attentively listening to classroom discussions; participating in break-out discussion groups with your classmates; and/or coming to talk to me after class or during office hours.

Technology in the classroom

Use of portable electronic devices (laptops, smartphones, tablets, etc.) is not allowed in this class. Even if you're not actively using your device, you may not have it out in front of you. Keep

it in your bag; or even better, don't even bring it with you to class. Everyone's attention should be focused on what's happening in class, and use of electronic devices can be distracting to those around you. You should, however, **bring a notebook and writing instrument with you every day to class**, for taking notes and to facilitate with in-class activities. You should also **bring paper copies of the day's readings and of your micro-assignment submission**.

Honor Code

One of the aims of this (and really, *any* university-level) course is to develop your ability to express yourself intelligently and responsibly. Part of what expressing yourself intelligently and responsibly involves is situating your own views in relation to others'. Plagiarizing others' views, or failing to acknowledge views you are responding to, runs counter to this aim. Because of this, plagiarism and all other forms of academic dishonesty will be treated with the greatest severity in this course. You should make yourself familiar with the University's Honor Code; see <http://communitystandards.stanford.edu>.

Accessibility

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oea).

Academic Resources

The Hume Center for Writing and Speaking offers support in any and all areas of both writing and speaking. Both scheduled appointments and drop-in tutoring are available and always encouraged. New, residence-based tutoring is also available in dorms.

- Writing Tutors: undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center/writing
- Speaking Tutors: undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center/speaking
- Academic Skills Coaching: adinag.youcanbook.me

Email

Questions should ideally be brought to me in person, either at lecture or during my office hours. If you would prefer to correspond via email, my email address is williec@stanford.edu. I will respond to emails within two business days.

Basic Schedule

DATE(S)	READINGS*	TOPIC
1/9-11	George Saunders, 'The 400-Pound CEO'	Introduction
1/16-18	Nussbaum (1995) Ayad Akhtar, <i>Disgraced</i>	Literature & moral education
1/23-25	Posner (1997) Shakespeare, <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	Literature & (a)moral education
1/30-2/1	Nussbaum (1985) Henry James, <i>The Beast in the Jungle</i>	Literature & moral attention
2/6-8	Murdoch (1970) Flannery O'Connor, 'The Displaced Person'	Literature & moral vision
2/13-2/15	Moran (1994) Alice Munro, 'Wild Swans'	Literature, emotion, & imagination
2/20-22	Gendler (2000) Edward Albee, <i>The Goat</i>	Literature & immoral imaginings
2/27-3/1	Jacobson (1997) Junot Díaz, 'The Cheater's Guide to Love'	Immoral literature
3/6-8	Nelson (1995) Jake Halpern, 'The Cop'	Moral counternarratives
3/13-15	David Foster Wallace, 'This Is Water'	Presentations & wrap-up

*Refer to the detailed schedule below for fuller specifications of each day's readings.

Detailed Schedule

Each day's readings are sorted into the following three categories:

- » **REQUIRED:** You have to read it! The main reading we will be discussing in class
- **RECOMMENDED:** You will benefit from reading it! I may refer to its ideas in class
- ★ **EXTRA:** Totally optional, for when you're really interested in the day's topic.

Reminder: All the readings listed below are either found in one of the required texts or available freely from bit.ly/phil194w.

1/9–11 Introduction

TUESDAY

- » **REQUIRED** (we'll be watching this in class): "Office Hours with George Saunders", *The New Yorker* (December 4, 2013): video.newyorker.com/watch/office-hours-with-george-saunders
- **RECOMMENDED:** "What Writers Really Do When They Write", George Saunders, *The Guardian* (March 4, 2017): theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/04/what-writers-really-do-when-they-write
- ★ **EXTRA:** Kidd and Castano (2013)
- ★ **EXTRA:** "Teaching robots right from wrong", Simon Parkin, *1843* (June/July 2017): 1843magazine.com/features/teaching-robots-right-from-wrong

THURSDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** George Saunders, 'The 400-Pound CEO' (in *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*)

1/16–18 Literature & moral education

TUESDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** Nussbaum (1995): Chapters 1 & 4
- **RECOMMENDED:** Nussbaum (1995): Chapters 2 & 3
- ★ **EXTRA:** Landy (2012): Chapter 1

THURSDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** Ayad Akhtar, *Disgraced*

1/23–25 Literature & (a)moral education

TUESDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** Posner (1997)
- **RECOMMENDED:** Nussbaum (1998)
- **RECOMMENDED:** Posner (1998)

THURSDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*: esp. I.3, III.1–3, & IV.1 (but read the whole thing)
- **RECOMMENDED:** ‘Shakespeare’s Cure For Xenophobia’, Stephen Greenblatt, *The New Yorker* (July 10 & 17, 2017): newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/10/shakespeares-cure-for-xenophobia

1/30–2/1 Literature & moral attention

TUESDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** Nussbaum (1985)
- **RECOMMENDED:** Nussbaum (1983)
- ★ **EXTRA:** Diamond (1982)

THURSDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** Henry James, *The Beast in the Jungle*

2/4 **TERM PAPER BRAINSTORM DUE!**

2/6–8 Literature & moral vision

TUESDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** Murdoch (1970): Chapter 3 (‘The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts’)
- **RECOMMENDED:** Murdoch (1970): Chapters 1 & 2

THURSDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** Flannery O'Connor, 'The Displaced Person' (in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*)

2/13–2/15 Literature, emotion, & imagination

TUESDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** Moran (1994)
- * **EXTRA:** Mullin (2004)

THURSDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** Alice Munro, 'Wild Swans' (in *The Beggar Maid*)
-

2/18 **TERM PAPER PITCH DUE!**

2/20–22 Literature & immoral imaginings

TUESDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** Gendler (2000)
- **RECOMMENDED:** Walton (2006)
- **RECOMMENDED:** Gendler (2006)

THURSDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** Edward Albee, *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*
-

2/25 **PEER REVIEW DUE!**

2/27-3/1 Immoral literature

TUESDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** Jacobson (1997)
- **RECOMMENDED:** Harold (2008)
- ★ **EXTRA:** Eaton (2012)

THURSDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** Junot Díaz, 'The Cheater's Guide to Love' (in *This Is How You Lose Her*)
-

3/4 **TERM PAPER SAMPLE PAGE DUE!**

3/6-8 Moral counternarratives

TUESDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** Nelson (1995)

THURSDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** 'The Cop', Jake Halpern, *The New Yorker* (August 10 & 17, 2015): newyorker.com/magazine/2015/08/10/the-cop

3/13-15 Presentations & wrap-up

TUESDAY

- » **No required readings!** Term paper presentations to be presented in class

THURSDAY

- » **REQUIRED:** "This Is Water", David Foster Wallace, Kenyon College Commencement Address (2005): youtube.com/watch?v=8CrOL-ydFMI (audio); metastatic.org/text/This%20is%20Water.pdf (text)

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