

PHL388H1F: Literature & Philosophy – Syllabus

Instructor: Willie Costello

Summer Session (F). Prerequisites: 7.5 courses with at least 1.5 in Philosophy. Distribution Requirement Status: Humanities. Breadth Requirement: Creative and Cultural Representations.

Lectures on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 15:00 to 18:00 in Sidney Smith 2127. Office hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays before class, from 13:30 to 14:45 in Jackman Humanities Building 432, or by appointment (email willie.costello@mail.utoronto.ca). Course website available through portal.utoronto.ca (please check regularly for announcements and other updates).

Course description

Literature is a topic of much philosophical interest. First, there's the fact that works of literature often deal with "philosophical" questions (e.g., What is death? How ought one live? What is the nature of human consciousness?). How, then, one might wonder, does the literary treatment of such questions differ from the philosophical? And is there anything philosophy can learn from literature in this regard?

Second, literature itself presents a number of unique philosophical problems. What, for example, makes a written text a work of "literature"? Is there a single "best" interpretation of each literary work, and can there be multiple equally acceptable interpretations? Can a "great" work of literature be morally repugnant? And what's the value of reading literature anyway?

This course is an investigation into these and related questions. We will take a look at several pieces of philosophical literature, and a philosophical look at literature as such. Emphasis will be placed throughout on relating the philosophical ideas we discuss to actual works of literature, and the literature we discuss to more abstract philosophical debates.

Course learning objectives

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

- define and explain the major philosophical theories of literature we have discussed
- apply these theories toward the explication of actual works of literature

- identify these theories as they appear (implicitly or explicitly) in people's judgments of literature
- evaluate the merits of different philosophical 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
- construct and defend a personal philosophical position on a literary issue

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

You will need copies of the following books, available for purchase at the Bob Miller Book Room (180 Bloor West (downstairs); M–F 9:00–18:00, SA 10:00–17:00).

- André Alexis, *Fifteen Dogs* (Coach House Books, 978-1552453056)
- Ted Chiang, *Stories of Your Life and Others* (Small Beer Press, 978-1931520720)
- Sheila Heti, *How Should A Person Be?* (House of Anansi Press, 978-1770898233)
- Peter Mendelsund, *What We See When We Read* (Vintage, 978-0804171632)
- Hannah Moscovitch, *This Is War* (Playwrights Canada Press, 978-1770911659)
- Plato, *Phaedo* (any edition)
- Raziel Reid, *When Everything Feels Like The Movies* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 978-1551525747)
- Yasmina Reza, 'Art' (Faber & Faber, 978-0571190140)
- Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (any edition)

In addition, the following textbook is a recommended text. A limited number of copies are available for purchase at the University of Toronto Bookstore (214 College; M–TH 9:00–19:00, F 9:00–18:00, SA 11:00–18:00, SU 12:00–17:00):

- Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Wiley-Blackwell, 978-1405121989)

Evaluation

Your grade for the course will be determined by the following five components: pre-class participation, in the form of “micro-assignments” submitted before each class meeting; in-class participation, in the form of “exit tickets” submitted at the end of each class meeting; two essays; and a final exam. The final exam is intended to test your overall comprehension of the course material, and the essays are intended to evaluate your analytical writing abilities while allowing you to develop your own thoughts on issues in the philosophy of literature. The micro-assignments and exit tickets, in turn, are intended to prepare you for the essays and final exam, and help you develop the skills they require. **Instructions and guidelines for all assignments will be posted on the course website.** The full grade breakdown is as follows:

<i>Component</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Due date</i>
Micro-assignments	20%	before each lecture
Exit tickets	5%	during each lecture
First essay	20%	May 29
Second essay	25%	June 19
Final exam	30%	exam week

- » **Your essays must be submitted on Blackboard by 11:59 P.M. on the day they are due.** Late papers will be docked 10% if handed in within the first 24 hours after the due date, and 5% for each subsequent 24 hour period after that (unless accompanied by valid documentation, found here: www.illnessverification.utoronto.ca). 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. Formatting guidelines will be provided along with assignment prompt.
- » **Micro-assignments must be completed and submitted on Blackboard by 3 P.M. the day of each lecture.** Micro-assignments submitted after this deadline will receive no credit. There will be twelve micro-assignments in total over the course of the term, and each micro-assignment counts for 2% of your final grade, up to 20%. (This means that, in effect, you can skip two micro-assignments without penalty.) Full credit for micro-assignments is

awarded when the student has made a honest attempt to respond intelligently to the assigned prompt(s). Determination of this criterion is at the discretion of the instructor.

- » **Exit tickets must be handed in to me at the end of each lecture.** There will be twelve opportunities for you to hand in an exit ticket over the course of the term (one for each lecture), and each exit ticket counts for 0.5% of your final grade, up to 5%. (This means that, in effect, 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 intelligently to the assigned prompt. Determination of this criterion is at the discretion of the instructor.

On plagiarism and academic dishonesty

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, run 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 Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters; see www.artsci.utoronto.ca/osai/students.

Accessibility

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have a disability and/or health consideration that may require accommodations, or any accessibility concerns about the course, classroom, or course materials, please contact Accessibility Services at 416-978-8060 or accessibility.utoronto.ca.

Email policy

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 willie.costello@mail.utoronto.ca. I will respond to emails within two business days.

And feel encouraged to forward me links to articles and videos you come across that seem related to our discussions! The issues we will be talking about are of more than just academic interest, and one of the goals of this course is to help you see how these issues relate to and arise in our everyday lives.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

The required reading for each class is the piece listed immediately to the right of the class's date. The Lamarque chapter listed in parentheses at the top of each week is optional; you are encouraged to do these readings *after* the week's lectures, to clarify the issues discussed in class.

Note that, in addition to the assignments listed below, one micro-assignment is due before each class meeting and one exit ticket is due at the end of each class meeting. Check the course website for specific assignment instructions.

	WEEK 1	The Philosophy of Literature	(Lamarque ch. 1, pp. 1–27)
5/12		(no required reading)	
5/14		Yasmina Reza, 'Art'	
	WEEK 2	What is "Literature"?	(Lamarque ch. 2, pp. 29–66)
5/19		Sheila Heti, <i>How Should A Person Be?</i>	
5/21		Ted Chiang, 'Liking What You See' (<i>Stories of Your Life and Others</i> pp. 237–274)	
	WEEK 3	Fiction & Fictionality	(Lamarque ch. 5, pp. 186–209)
5/26		Peter Mendelsund, <i>What We See When We Read</i>	
5/28		Hannah Moscovitch, <i>This Is War</i>	
5/29		DUE BY MIDNIGHT: First Essay	
	WEEK 4	Reading & Interpretation	(Lamarque ch. 4, pp. 132–137 & 148–173)
6/2		André Alexis, <i>Fifteen Dogs</i>	Guest Speaker: André Alexis!
6/4		Ted Chiang, 'Story of Your Life' (<i>SYLO</i> pp. 91–145)	
	WEEK 5	Literature & Value	(Lamarque ch. 7, pp. 258–275 & 284–295)
6/9		Raziel Reid, <i>When Everything Feels Like The Movies</i>	
6/11		Ted Chiang, 'Hell Is the Absence of God' (<i>SYLO</i> pp. 205–235)	
	WEEK 6	Literature & Truth	(Lamarque ch. 6, pp. 225–254)
6/16		Leo Tolstoy, <i>The Death of Ivan Iylich</i>	
6/18		Plato, <i>Phaedo</i>	
6/19		DUE BY MIDNIGHT: Second Essay	