

# Literature & Philosophy (PHL388H1S)

Instructor: Willie Costello, [willie.costello@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:willie.costello@mail.utoronto.ca)

*Last updated January 2, 2020*

Meetings on Mondays and Wednesdays from 18:00 to 19:30 in OISE 2279. Office hours on Mondays from 14:00 to 16:00, in person in JHB 424. To meet with me outside of my regularly scheduled office hours (either in person or by text/voice/video chat), send me an email with a few times that'd work for you.

Course website on Quercus, at [q.utoronto.ca](http://q.utoronto.ca). Course readings available from [bit.ly/phl388dropbox](http://bit.ly/phl388dropbox).

## *Course description*

Can we learn anything important from literature? Does reading literature make us better people? Can a good work of literature be morally bad? While you may think that the answers to these questions are obvious, they've all proven to be a matter of considerable philosophical controversy over the years. This course is an investigation into these and related questions, through a combined study of philosophical works that address them and literary works that speak to them. Throughout our investigation we will more broadly explore the question of whether the medium of literature can convey philosophical insights that cannot be conveyed through other means and, thus, what the philosophical value of literature might be.

## *Course learning objectives*

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

- explain the major philosophical ideas about literature we have discussed
- apply these ideas toward the explication of actual literary works
- read and interpret literary works carefully, thoughtfully, and philosophically
- identify philosophical questions & themes in the literary works you read
- dissect your own and others' intuitions and presuppositions about literature
- construct an original philosophical analysis of a literary work of your choice

### *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 class. **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 others in class
- we have the responsibility to **welcome challenges** to our own opinions, and 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*

All required readings will be freely available online, from [bit.ly/phl388dropbox](http://bit.ly/phl388dropbox). Note, however, that in order to complete your Term Paper you will need to read a work of literature of your own choosing and that to access some works you may need to purchase them. Note also that thousands of works can be found for free through the University of Toronto Libraries ([library.utoronto.ca](http://library.utoronto.ca)) and the Toronto Public Library ([torontopubliclibrary.ca](http://torontopubliclibrary.ca)).

### *Content disclaimer*

The literary works we will be reading include depictions of sex, violence, sexual violence, and offensive language (including racist language). Although these topics can be difficult to talk about, I have chosen to assign these works because I believe they can provide important insight into these topics and allow us to see them with greater clarity. If you feel that interacting with any of this content will present special difficulties for you, please get in touch with me so that alternative arrangements can be made.

## Evaluation

COMPONENT	WEIGHT	DUE DATE
<hr/>		
<i>At-home writing exercises</i>	(17%)	
Reading journals	12%	before most classes
Reflection pieces	5%	after some classes
<hr/>		
<i>In-class engagement</i>	(18%)	
Entrance/exit tickets	4%	start/end of each class
Discussion lead	8%	once during class
Engagement self-assessment #1	2%	1/31
Engagement self-assessment #2	2%	3/6
Engagement self-assessment #3	2%	4/3
<hr/>		
<i>Midterm paper (choose one)</i>	(20%)	
Midterm paper #1	20%	1/26
Midterm paper #2	20%	2/16
Midterm paper #3	20%	3/15
<hr/>		
<i>Term paper</i>	(45%)	
Brainstorm	1%	1/19
Exploration	2%	2/2
Bibliography	2%	2/16
Journal #1	1%	3/1
Journal #2	1%	3/15
Presentation	5%	final two weeks
Presentation participation	3%	final two weeks
Term paper	30%	4/3

### *Due dates & lateness policies*

- » **Reading journals** must be submitted online by 17:00 before class. No late submissions. You can skip 2 reading journals without penalty.
- » **Reflection pieces** must be submitted online by 17:00 before class. No late submissions. You can skip 1 reflection piece without penalty.
- » **Entrance/exit tickets** must be completed and submitted in class, at the start/end of each class. No late submissions. You can skip 4 entrance/exit tickets without penalty.
- » **Engagement self-assessments** must be submitted online by the end of the night on their due date. (“The end of the night” means 8 A.M. the following morning.) No late submissions.
- » **Midterm papers** must be submitted online by the end of the night on their due date. Late submissions will be docked 10% for each 24-hour period after the due date.
- » The term paper **brainstorm, exploration, bibliography, & journals** must be submitted online by the end of the night on their due date. No late submissions.
- » **Term papers** must be submitted online by the end of the night on their due date. No late submissions (as the due date is the last day that term work may be submitted).

That being said, I’m sensitive to the fact that life doesn’t always cooperate with deadlines. If you feel you are in a situation where you should be granted an extension on an assignment, please get in touch with me as soon as you can. (I will be much more sympathetic towards extension requests that are made well in advance of the assignment deadline.)

### *Further information on course assignments*

- » **Reading journals:** Before most classes you are to submit a summary of your personal notes and reactions on the day’s required reading – a “reading journal”. The purpose of these journals is: (a) to deepen your appreciation of the readings; (b) to enhance our discussions of the readings; and (c) to improve your critical reading skills.

**Each reading journal counts for 1% of your final grade, up to 12%.** You will have, in total, 14 opportunities to submit reading journals over the course of the term. This means that you can skip 2 reading journals without penalty. (You do not need to tell me when you’re choosing not to submit a reading journal.)

- » **Reflection pieces:** After each class where we discuss a new literary work, you are to write an informal essay of at least 250 words, reflecting on the reading in light of our in-class discussion – a “reflection piece”. The purpose of these pieces is: (a) to deepen your understanding of the literary work; (b) to enhance our subsequent discussion of the work; and (c) to improve your philosophical analysis skills.

**Each reflection piece counts for 1% of your final grade, up to 5%.** You will have, in total, 6 opportunities to submit reflection pieces over the course of the term. This means that you can skip 1 reflection piece without penalty. (You do not need to tell me when you’re choosing not to submit a reflection piece.)

- » **Entrance/exit tickets:** At the start or end of each class you will be asked to write a short reflection relating to the day’s material – an “entrance ticket” when it’s at the start of the class, an “exit ticket” when it’s at the end. Your reflections can be written and submitted either through Quercus or on an index card that will be provided to you in class. The purpose of these tickets is: (a) to provide you an opportunity to gather your thoughts before our in-class discussions begin / to review and reflect on what you’ve learned after our discussions have ended; and (b) to maintain a record of class attendance.

**Each entrance ticket counts for 0.25% of your final grade, up to 4%.** You will have, in total, 20 opportunities to hand in tickets over the course of the term (one for each class meeting aside from the final four). This means that you can skip 4 entrance/exit tickets without penalty. Each class will include either an entrance or an exit ticket, but you will not know in advance which it will be.

- » *For reading journals, reflection pieces, and entrance/exit tickets, full credit will be awarded when the student has made an honest attempt to complete the assigned task; determination of this criterion is at the discretion of the instructor.*

- » **Discussion lead:** Once during term you will be called upon to lead a small group discussion in class. This will involve preparing a guided discussion activity for your group and facilitating a discussion between your group’s members. 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 couple 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 discussion for a while.

- » **Engagement self-assessments:** You are expected to actively engage in this course, not only during class but also outside of class – on the course website, online more broadly, and in real

life. (You will be provided in advance with a list of example ways of engaging, as guidance.) Three times during the term you will be asked to assess your engagement in the course. The purpose of these self-assessments is: (a) to provide you an opportunity to critically reflect on how you're engaging; (b) to allow for and encourage diverse modes of course engagement; and (c) to foster a cooperative learning community.

**Each self-assessment counts for up to 3% of your final grade, up to a total of 6%.** You will have, in total, 3 opportunities to submit self-assessments over the course of the term. Each self-assessment will consist of four questions:

1. How have you tried to engage **yourself** in this course?
2. How have you tried to engage and support **others** in or through this course?
3. What are some ways you could **improve** your engagement in this course?
4. On a scale from 0 to 3, how would you rate your overall engagement in this course?
  - 3 – I did outstanding: I engaged above and beyond all expectations
  - 2 – I did a good amount: I engaged as much as one should
  - 1 – I should be doing more: I engaged, but only did the bare minimum
  - 0 – I'll be honest: I did not engage at all

In general, **your grade for each self-assessment will match the rating you give yourself on question (4)**, so long as the rating is warranted by the evidence provided in your answers to questions (1) and (2).

- » **Midterm paper:** Over the course of the term you are to complete one midterm paper, on one of three available topics (corresponding to the three major topics of the course). When you hand in your paper will depend on which topic you choose. This paper will be a philosophical analysis of a particular view about the nature of literature, of approximately 1000 words in length.
- » **Term paper:** The major assignment for this course is a term paper. This is an opportunity for you to think about a particular literary work (of your choosing) and what it tells us about a particular philosophical topic (also of your choosing). Your term paper should be a focused interpretive essay, of approximately 2500 words in length, defending a specific and original thesis about the philosophical value of your chosen literary work.

Along the way, you will complete a number of preparatory assignments: a “brainstorm” where you formulate a suitable philosophical topic; an “exploration” where you identify possible literary works on that topic; a “bibliography” where you detail relevant philosophical works on

that topic; and two “journals” where you write down a summary of your personal notes and reactions on your chosen literary work and philosophical article.

In addition, in the final two weeks of class, you will give an in-class presentation, of five minutes in length, introducing your chosen literary work and summarizing what you think it has to tell us about your chosen philosophical topic. This presentation is meant to be an opportunity for you to practice expressing philosophical ideas in a digestible and engaging manner. **The kind of presentation you give is up to you.** Most straightforwardly, it can be a slideshow presentation (in the manner of a TED Talk); alternatively, it could be a video, a short story, an animation, a skit, a song, a podcast, a comic strip, a website, a game, an app – almost anything really. Be creative!

### *Academic Integrity*

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 drawing on, 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. Students should make themselves familiar with the University of Toronto’s Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters; see [artsci.utoronto.ca/osai/students](http://artsci.utoronto.ca/osai/students).

### *Turnitin*

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to Turnitin.com for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University’s use of the Turnitin.com service are described on the Turnitin.com web site.

### *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 accommodation, please approach me and/or Accessibility Services at 416-978-8060 or [accessibility.utoronto.ca](http://accessibility.utoronto.ca).

## Schedule

DATE TOPIC/READING

---

---

### On the many intersections of literature & philosophy

---

1/6 Introductory meeting (no required reading)

### On utilitarianism

---

1/8 Ursula K. Le Guin, 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' (1973)  
Bernard Williams, 'George & Jim', from *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (1973)

### UNIT 1: Can we learn anything important from literature?

---

---

1/13 *Conceptions of literary truth* Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, 220–239

1/15 *The epistemology of literature* Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, 239–254

### On free will & moral responsibility

---

1/20 Ted Chiang, 'Anxiety is the Dizziness of Freedom' (2019)

1/22 Thomas Nagel, 'Moral Luck' (1979)

### On dating & bad sex

---

1/27 Kristen Roupenian, 'Cat Person' (2017)

1/29 Amia Srinivasan, 'Does anyone have the right to sex?' (2018)

### UNIT 2: Does reading literature make us better people?

---

---

2/3 *The case for* Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, Chapters 1 & 4 (1995)

2/5 *The case against* Richard Posner, 'Against Ethical Criticism' (1997)

### On identity & Islamophobia

---

2/10 Ayad Akhtar, *Disgraced* (2012)

2/12 Akeel Bilgrami, 'What Is a Muslim?' (1992)



## Schedule

### On literature & empathy

---

- 2/24 George Saunders, 'The 400-Pound CEO' (1996)  
2/26 Martha Nussbaum, 'Flawed Crystals' (1983), 39–47

### UNIT 3: Can a good work of literature be morally bad?

---

---

- 3/2 *The case against* Berys Gaut, 'The ethical criticism of art' (1998)  
3/4 *The case for* James Harold, 'On Judging the Moral Value of Narrative Artworks' (2006)

### On masculinity & misogyny

---

- 3/9 Junot Díaz, 'The Cheater's Guide to Love' (2012)  
3/11 Junot Díaz, 'The Silence' (2018)  
'The Writer Zinzi Clemmons Accuses Junot Díaz...', *The New York Times* (2018)

### On sexism & sexual harassment in higher education

---

- 3/16 David Mamet, *Oleanna* (1992)  
3/18 Seo-Young Chu, 'A Refuge for Jae-In Doe: Fugues in the Key of English Major' (2017)

### In-class presentations

---

---

- 3/23 In-class presentations (no required reading)  
3/25 In-class presentations (no required reading)  
3/30 In-class presentations (no required reading)  
4/1 In-class presentations (no required reading)