

## PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAS IN LITERATURE

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Whence truth? Whence reality? Why does truth have such a quiet breast? If philosophers debate the criteria for epistemic justification, the poets compare truth to wisps of cloud and black vespers pageants. If philosophers explicate conditions of virtue and ethics, poets rather show us monstrosity and cunning evil. Where philosophers establish arguments for human will or causal constraint, novelists paint characters driven by passion, rage, and despair. They illustrate and evoke images of evil, ambiguity, and confusion about reality, self, and death, the grave and constant in human sufferings. This is why Nietzsche could say that Dostoevsky was the only psychologist from whom he had anything to learn, why C.S. Lewis could say that literature enriches and adds to reality, why Putnam could say that literature presents human predicaments with such vivid diversity. Literature confronts us with striking quandaries and struggles with good and evil, questions about the self and reality, the quest for meaning, whether we have the will to make decisions or whether we are governed by myriad causes and events. In this class we will read some classics and provocative works of literature to stimulate philosophical reflection and contemplate ideas from unanticipated perspectives.



The most frightening thing in this world is discovering the abnormal in that which is closest to us.

- Kobo Abe, *Inter Ice Age 4*

Is there not a sort of remorse that precedes sin? Was it remorse at the very fact that I existed?

- Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask*

“You have come to crucify me...sacrifice me...condemn me...”

“I’m doing this so that you will be reborn to eternal life. Your faith and your salvation are more important than your freedom or even your life.”

- Evelyn Accad, *The Excised*

Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow.

- Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

One of God’s greatest mercies is that he keeps us perpetually occluded.

- Philip K. Dick, *Valis*

Hell is the home of honor, duty, justice, and the rest of the seven deadly virtues. All the wickedness on earth is done in their name: where else but in hell should they have their reward?....

And I tell you that in the arts of life man invents nothing; but in the arts of death he outdoes Nature herself.... This marvelous force of Life of which you boast is a force of Death....

- G.B. Shaw, *Man and Superman*

The thorn of death falls from heaven, and its myriad forms leave us no room to move.

- Kobo Abe, *Woman in the Dunes*

...everybody, knowing the meaninglessness of existence, sets the center of his compass at his own home.

- Kobo Abe, *Woman in the Dunes*

Blessed darkness like unto her own night, never had O greeted it with such joy, blessed chains that bore her away from herself.

- Pauline Réage, *Story of O*

I swear to you ... that to be overly conscious is a sickness, a real, thorough sickness.

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*

Did you forget that peace and even death are dearer to man than free choice in the knowledge of good and evil?

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

“Everything you lived by and still live by is a lie, a deception that blinds you from the reality of life and death.”

- Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

...he had too inflated an opinion of his worth to admit publicly his own insignificance.... He continued to insist in the correctness of his ideology.

- Irvin Yalom, *The Spinoza Problem*

*These devils seek to take away my God.*

- John Updike, *Terrorist*

He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with, and acquire knowledge from, beings of a superior nature: but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me.

- Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

What is so ghastly about exposed intestines?... Why are intestines so hideous?... Isn't it utterly identical to the beauty of glistening youthful skin? If human beings could but invert their souls and bodies, gracefully roll them inside out like rose petals, and expose them to the sun and May breeze....

- Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*

Some people could look at a mud puddle and see an ocean with ships.

- Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Sometimes we see a cloud that's dragonish,  
A vapor sometime like a bear or lion,  
A towered citadel, a pendant rock,  
A forkèd mountain, or blue promontory  
With trees upon 't that nod unto the world  
And mock our eyes with air. Thou hast seen these signs.  
They are black vesper's pageants.

- William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*

### Required Texts:

Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein*  
 Philip K. Dick: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*  
 George Bernard Shaw: *Man & Superman*  
 Fyodor Dostoevsky: *The Grand Inquisitor*  
 Yukio Mishima: *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*  
 Kobo Abe: *Woman in the Dunes* (film)  
 John Keene: *Counternarratives*  
 Ursula Le Guin: *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas)  
 Evelyn Accad: *The Excised*  
 Zora Neale Hurston: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

### Assignments and Grading:

In *addition* to the required reading, the students will be assigned:

**1) A midterm essay**  
 of 4-6 pages  
 (40 % of total grade)

**2) A final take-home essay exam**  
 of 5-7 pages  
 (40% of total grade)

**3) The task of participating in class!**

You are expected to come to class prepared for a cordial and informed discussion of the material  
 (20% of total grade)

\* **Grading** will be determined by the effort of the student, her/his evidence of having carefully read and contemplated the material, and her/his expression of independent thought on the ideas. Late assignments will suffer penalties as follows: the subtraction of one grade increment for every class the assignment is late.

\* **Attendance** is mandatory. After the 3<sup>rd</sup> absence one letter grade will be subtracted from your final course grade. **Lateness** will not be tolerated. It is rude and disruptive, and may be considered a complete absence. Visible lack of preparation for a session will also be counted as a missed class and will result in a proportional deduction of points from the final grade.

\* **Readings** consist of the required texts. There will also be a number of *optional* handouts supplied to help students understand the primary readings and provide perspective. Suggested readings appear below the required & optional handout readings and are for your interest and edification only.

## **IMPORTANT:**

### **Class Credo and Ethic:**

Like all classes, philosophy is about the free exchange of ideas as well as relentless questioning of beliefs and concepts. You are entitled to your beliefs but in a philosophy class *no idea is spared* from questioning or examination. If you do not want your beliefs or faith questioned, you are *strongly* advised to enroll in other classes more suitable to your beliefs and temperament.

### **Participation and Conduct:**

**Cell phones, computers, MP3 players, video games, and other non-class-related accouterments will absolutely be turned off during class.**

There will be no web surfing, instant messaging, texting, tweeting, game playing, or any similar activities during class. These activities are disrespectful and disrupt the instructor and your fellow classmates. Students ignoring this rule will be considered absent, and it will impact your class participation grade.

Students are expected to engage in lively discussion and spirited exchange. They need not agree with one another and they are encouraged to question ideas, but they must also be respectful towards other students and the instructor. You can argue forcefully for or against an idea, but are required to comport yourselves with civility.

### **Communications:**

You may email me with concerns and questions, but do not expect me to recapitulate class lectures or discussions. Feel free to come by for office hours if you wish to discuss the ideas or other issues. Office hours will be by appointment, and usually before or after class sessions.

### **Academic Honesty:**

Violations of Rutgers policies on academic honesty will not be tolerated in this course. Plagiarism and cheating will be grounds for failure, if not expulsion from the university.

## COURSE OUTLINE:

### I. INTRODUCTION

Overview and Course Goals  
 The (In)compatibility of Philosophy and Religion  
 Modes and Strategies of Reading

### II. FRANKENSTEIN

Human Hubris  
 Denial of Death  
 Envy of Life / Ability to Create Life  
 Monstrosity as Prosthesis  
 The Problem of Knowledge

#### Readings:

- Shelley: *Frankenstein*
- McCrosin: Why Bad Things Happen to Good Monsters
- Gilbert and Gubar: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve (in the Norton edition)

#### Suggested Readings:

Horney: *Feminine Psychology*  
 Lederer: *The Fear of Women*  
 Bronfen: *Over Her Dead Body*  
 Ransohoff: *Fear and Envy*  
 Michaud: *Frankenstein and Philosophy*

### III. MAN AND SUPERMAN

Worship, Fear, and Evil  
 The Fungibility of God and Devil  
 Individuality and Superhumanity  
 Life and Death

#### Readings:

- *Man and Superman Act III: Don Juan in Hell*

#### Suggested Readings:

Nietzsche: *Beyond Good and Evil*  
 Arendt: *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*  
 Bernstein: *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Investigation*  
 Goldberg: *Speaking with the Devil*  
 Russell: *The Prince of Darkness*  
 Huxley: *Ape and Essence*  
 Staub: *The Roots of Evil*

#### **IV. THE GRAND INQUISITOR**

Faith and Sacrifice

Piety, Authority, and Authoritarianism

Miracle, Mystery, and Authority

The Capacity to Endure Reality

Readings:

- Dostoevsky: *The Grand Inquisitor*

Suggested Readings:

Dostoevsky: *The Brothers Karamazov / Devils*

Bakhtin: *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*

Mochulsky: *Dostoevsky*

Girard: *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*

La Barre: *The Ghost Dance: Origins of Religion*

Avalos: *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence*

Eller: *Cruel Deeds, Virtuous Violence*

#### **V. THE TEMPLE OF THE GOLDEN PAVILION**

Beauty and Evil

Envy, Self-loathing, and Hatred

Symbolic Self-Objects

Beauty as Antidote and Obstacle

Readings:

- Mishima: *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*
- Piven: Impotence, the Feminine, and Death in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*

Suggested Readings:

Hosoe: Ba-ra-kei: *Ordeal by Roses*

Dostoevsky: *Crime and Punishment*

Burke: *Gender and Envy*

Berke: *The Tyranny of Malice*

Nathan: *Mishima: A Biography*

Yourcenar: *Mishima: A Vision of the Void*

Piven: *The Madness and Perversion of Yukio Mishima*

#### **VI. WOMAN IN THE DUNES (FILM)**

Meaning(lessness) of Life

Meaninglessness and Despair

Frenzy, Mania, Distraction, and Purpose

Deserts and Sisyphean Repetition

Suggested Readings:

Abe: *Woman in the Dunes* (novel)

Camus: *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Sartre: *No Exit*

Nietzsche: *The Gay Science*

May: *Man's Search for Himself*

Becker: *The Birth and Death of Meaning*

Frankl: *The Will to Meaning*

## **VII. DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP?**

Epistemology, Perception, Reality, Simulacrum  
 Existential Despair & Religion  
 Hope, Fiction, and Falsehood  
 Humanity and Inhumanity

Readings:

- Dick: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*
- Piven: And God Created Androids in His Own Image

Suggested Readings (and Viewings):

Scott: *Blade Runner* (film)  
 Abadi & Rogers: *Reality and/or Realities*  
 Segal: *Phantasy in Everyday Life*  
 Becker: *The Denial of Death*  
 Schumaker: *The Corruption of Reality*  
 Modell: *Other Times, Other Realities*  
 Alcoff: *Real Knowing*

## **VIII. THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD**

Freedom and Destiny  
 Social Definition and Liberation  
 Religion, Numinosity, and Liminality  
 Identity, Sexuality, and Gender

Readings:

- Hurston: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Suggested Readings:

Parfit: Personal Identity  
 Holland: *Poems in Persons*  
 McDougall: *The Many Faces of Eros*  
 DuBois: *The Souls of Black Folk*

## **IX. COUNTERNARRATIVES**

Freedom: Legal, Social, and Psychological  
 Identity, Perception, and Knowledge  
 Cultural Mythologies, Narratives, and Voices  
 Emancipation and Danger

Readings:

- Keene: *Counternarratives*

Suggested Readings:

Ellison: *Invisible Man*  
 Baldwin: *The Fire Next Time*  
 Patterson: *Rituals of Blood*  
 Warren: *Ontological Terror*



## **X. THE EXCISED**

Moral Judgment

Cultural Relativism

The Ethics of Ambiguity

The Fear of Women

Excising Sexuality

Excising Evil

Radical and Banal Evil

### Readings:

- Accad: *The Excised*
- Le Guin: *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*

### Suggested Readings:

El Saadawi: *The Hidden Face of Eve*

Accad: *Sexuality and War*

Noddings: *Women and Evil*

Rheingold: *The Fear of Being a Woman*

Dijkstra: *Evil Sisters*

Ruether: *Religion and Sexism*

Berkday: *Women and Religion*

Eilberg Schwartz & Doniger: *Off with Her Head*

Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*