

HL3046: Literature and Evil
Wednesdays, 2:30pm – 5:20pm

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Description

In this course, we will consider the conceptualization and use of distinct notions of “evil” in literature and literary theory—whether as a “problem” (in the sense of a moral and/or intellectual challenge), a source of aesthetic inspiration, a feature of narrative and/or poetry, a strategy for prejudice and discrimination, or mere mystification and fantasy. Most of us are familiar with the experience of a disjunction between the way the world is, and the way (we think) the world ought to be. Such experiences can at times attain a certain quality or intensity that makes us reach for the word “evil,” and seem to us to require narratives of justification which may additionally legitimize or delegitimize a possible set of actions. At other times, the experience of evil will prompt us to imagine different versions of historical and counterfactual worlds where the terms of existence are more (or less) hospitable to human and/or animal flourishing. Such feats of the imagination may end up placing us in a similar position to the various metaphysical creators of a variety of religious traditions, raising the question of the age-old analogy between author and God. As we go through this course, we will seek to hone our understanding of the meaning(s) we have given to this elusive yet ever-present notion of “evil,” paying particular attention to the ways in which various writers and thinkers have been drawn to and/or repelled by its forceful claim on the senses, the intellect, and the imagination. Our investigations will also lead us to philosophers and theologians who have sought to grapple with “evil” as a phenomenon, an experience, and/or a concept, and will interest students in particular with a mind for free, interdisciplinary inquiry into a topic for which there are perhaps no firm answers.

Books you may wish to purchase

Most of the texts on your reading list are available online. You may, however, wish to get your hands on a copy of the following:

Cormac McCarthy. *Blood Meridian*. Picador.

Djuna Barnes. *Nightwood*. Faber.

Georges Bataille. *Story of the Eye*. Penguin.

William Shakespeare. *Othello*. Oxford.

Assessment Structure

Class Participation	10%
Research Presentation	20%
Research Essay	35%
Final Exam	35%

Class Participation (10%)

Over the semester, students are evaluated based on their attendance and interest in the course.

Research Presentation (20%)

Students present a case study on the problem of evil in relation to creaturely life.

Research Essay (35%)

Students formulate a research question on literature and evil in consultation with me, and prepare a 3000-word research essay for submission by the end of Week 9 (30/3/2025).

Final Exam (35%)

Students sit for a written exam at the end of the course.

Academic Integrity

Any use of generative AI for this course has to be integrated with your critical thinking and judgment. AI may assist in helping you develop the ability to pursue independent lines of thought and research but it cannot replace rigorous thinking and literary criticism. A fail grade will be given in the case of plagiarised work, so please be sure to cite generative AI usage in accordance with MLA/Chicago conventions.

Seminar Schedule

Introduction: What is Evil?

Wk 1 *Overview*

Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser. "Introduction." *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil* (2017).

Antonia Ruppel. "Kakology: A Study of Some Evil Words." *Evil: A History* (2019).

William James. "The Sick Soul." *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).

Wk 2 *Why Evil?*

Book of Job (KJV).

G.K. Chesterton. "Introduction to the Book of Job" (1916).

Part I: Beasts of Evil

Wk 3 *Thinking Natural Evil*

William Blake. *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794).

Georges Bataille. "William Blake." In *Literature and Evil* (1957).

Denise Levertov. "To the Snake." *With Eyes At the Back of Our Heads* (1960).

Denise Levertov. "Come Into Animal Presence." *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961).

Wk 4 *Chained to Food*

Werner Herzog. *Grizzly Man* (2005). [Film]

Arthur Schopenhauer. Selections from *The World as Will and Representation* (1819/44).

Matthew Halteman. "Meat and Evil." *Evil: A History* (2019).

Wk 5 **Research Presentations**

Part II: Priests of Evil

Wk 6 *The Art of Persuasion*

William Shakespeare. *Othello* (1603–4)

Walter Benjamin. Excerpts from *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928).

Terry Eagleton. "Obscene Enjoyment." *On Evil* (2010).

Wk 7 *The Art of Rule*

Vladimir Solovyov. *A Story of Anti-Christ* (1900).

Fyodor Dostoevsky. "The Grand Inquisitor." From *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–80).

Part III: Flowers of Evil

Wk 8 *"No Modernism without Lesbians": The Poetics of Evil and its Problems*

Charles Baudelaire. "Lesbos" & "Damned Women." *Flowers of Evil* (1857).

Djuna Barnes. *Nightwood* (1936).

Walter Benjamin. "Central Park" (1985; written 1938–9).

Wk 9 *Further Problems Thinking Beauty, Sex, and Evil*

Georges Bataille. *Story of the Eye* (1928).

Georges Bataille. "Eye" & "The Big Toe." *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (1985).

Research Essay Due (30/3)

Part IV: (Not) Making Sense of Evil

Wk 10 *Evil Revivalism vs. Evil Skepticism*

Stephen de Wijze. "Defining the Concept of Evil." *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Evil* (2019).

Phillip Cole. "Deliver Us From Evil: The Case for Skepticism." *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Evil* (2019).

François Jullien. "The Shadow on the Picture: Of Evil or the Negative" (2005). *Critical Inquiry*.

Part V: Epic of Evil

Wk 11 *Universal Evil?*

Cormac McCarthy. *Blood Meridian* (1985). [Part I]

Wk 12 *Final Judgment*

Cormac McCarthy. *Blood Meridian* (1985). [Part II]