The Problem of Evil

Yale Summer Session 2021
(Session 2)

TTh: 9:00-12:15
Online

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Course Description

This course examines “the problem of evil” in three major literary texts from the Renaissance to our own time: Milton’s Paradise Lost, Shelley’s Frankenstein, Rushdie’s Satanic Verses. An ancient philosophical question with continuing metaphysical, epistemological, moral and ethical consequences, the question of what evil is, how it enters the world, and what we can (or should) do about it animates a variety of texts in the Western tradition. How can the idea of an omniscient, benevolent god coexist with the presence of suffering in the world? Does evil exist or is it an aspect of human behavior and choice? What can we do to
train ourselves to combat evil and suffering? Focusing on a close reading of three intertwined texts along with supplementary readings, we will tease out the key facets of these issues and aim to understand how the “problem of evil” has had philosophical, political and social effects over time.

Texts

*The following texts are required and available at the University Bookstore:*


Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text* (Oxford World's Classics)


*Supplemental readings will be posted in Canvas.*

Weekly Schedule

**Week 1:** *Introductions: The Ancient Problem of Evil*

13 July

Introductions: What is “The Problem of Evil?” (Lucretius, Lactantius, Augustine)

Intro to Milton & *Paradise Lost*

15 July

Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 1-2 (complete)


**Week 2:** *Evil as Temptation: Milton’s Epic Theodicy*

20 July

Milton, *Paradise Lost*, excerpts from Book 3, Book 4 (complete); Books 5-8 (excerpts)

*Bring Passage to class for discussion*

22 July

Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Books 9-10 (complete); Books 11-12 (excerpts)

*Responses & Comments Discussed IN CLASS*
Week 3: Humanity's Evils and A New Science

Supplemental: Hume, from *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*
*Bring Passage to class for discussion*
*Midterm Paper Due*

Supplemental: Schelling, "Philosophical Investigations concerning Human Freedom" (excerpts)
*Responses & Comments Discussed IN CLASS*

Week 4: Postmodern Theodicies

3 Aug Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, pp. 3-129 (Part I-II)
Supplemental: Excerpts from The Koran
*Bring Passage to class for discussion*

5 Aug Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, pp. 130-304 (Parts IV-V.1)
*Responses & Comments Discussed IN CLASS*

Week 5:

Supplemental: Levinas, "Useless Suffering"
*Bring Passage to class for discussion*

*Responses & Comments Discussed IN CLASS*
*Final Paper Due*

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Course Policies and Requirements

**I. ASSIGNMENTS**

**A. Reading:** This is a course that covers a lot of ground historically and intellectually: it is imperative that you KEEP UP WITH THE READING from week to week! The primary tool that the course will attempt to develop is the skill in “close reading,” within and across texts using the clues that a writer gives to make sense of his subject. Most of the works we’ll read are dense; they’re impossible to skim if one wants to make full sense of them. Accordingly, plan your reading over the course of the week, so that you are not rushing at the last minute, which will frustrate both
you and me. This is also a course in which we’ll spend a good deal of time thinking about how we read and interpret literature—what questions we ask, and what approaches and strategies are useful in reading the works we treat. Feel free to bring your questions/dilemmas to class – or to me via email.

B. Speaking a.k.a Class Participation: It’s essential that you participate and engage with your classmates. Some people speak more easily than others, but it’s an assumption of the course that everyone can do it, and that practice makes you better at it. If you have difficulty in speaking in class, see me: I may be able to suggest ways to make it easier. Classroom performance does have an effect on grades (see below).

C. Bringing Passages to Class: Every Tuesday, you will identify and bring to class a substantial passage (minimum 15 lines) that you think is worth of discussion. You must TYPE OUT THE PASSAGE and bring to class, ready to screen share. This exercise is crucial to help you develop the key skill of literary analysis.

D. Responses: In order to help us stay focused and maintain stimulating conversations in class, you will post a question, observation or comment to the class Canvas site by 7:00am on Thursdays (exceptions noted in schedule above!). These posts should be a minimum of 300 words. We will discuss the responses in class each Thursday; you can of course post more frequently and informally. Not posting responses on time, or posting egregiously short or sloppy comments will negatively affect your grade. The point here is to help me understand what in the works we’re reading interests and challenges you: I will alter my class plan accordingly, so this is your chance to shape the direction of the course.

E. Commenting on Responses: You will post four comments on your fellow students’ responses over the course of the term. Comments should be a minimum of 150 words and actively engage—by posing a question or extending an argument—with the post to which you respond.

F. Formal Papers:
You will write two papers for this course, one of 4-6 pages in length, the second of 8-10pp in length. You are encouraged to meet with me in person to discuss a draft of your first paper. See schedule for due dates!

Requirements for written assignments: I expect all written assignments to be typed in a regular 12 point font, with 1-inch margins, proofread and carefully revised. Sloppy work is a mark of disrespect to both of us and I urge you to avoid it. You will be penalized for persistent technical errors (spelling mistakes, large font, short length etc.) up to a third of a letter grade (i.e. if you would get a B+, you will get a B instead).
II. GRADES

The grading structure for the course is as follows:

Participation: 20%
Responses & Comments: 20%
Paper 1: 25%
Paper 2: 35%

For an explanation of grades, see the “Grading Rubric” in Canvas.

IV. YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES

Attendance: Like the literary world itself, this course will rely on lively interchange; therefore attendance and full participation are required. This means having read the texts carefully and on time, having some specific responses to them that you are willing to share, being sufficiently alert to join in a lively conversation, and being willing to participate in readings and exercises. Given the brevity of the summer term, attendance is mandatory. Active participation will strengthen your grade.

Lateness is disruptive and disrespectful to all of us, so please make sure you get to class on time.

Bringing your books to class: You MUST bring the assigned text that we are discussing to class on the designated day. NO EXCUSES. Our discussion and analysis of texts depends on your being able to look at them closely, which is obviously not possible if you do not have your book. If circumstances hinder you from bringing a book to class, please come and discuss it with me. If I notice you are persistently without a book, I will consider it an unexcused absence.

Communication: It is your responsibility to make sure that Canvas is updated with the email address that you check. I will frequently send out emails to you and the class: you are responsible to ensure that you receive messages! I will use the course Classes v2 site periodically: it is your responsibility to check frequently for updates.

Office Hours: I have office hours so that I can talk to you outside of class. However, please note that office hours are intended for focused discussion of your academic and intellectual concerns and not for casual chats. Please see my handout on how best to use office hours before coming to visit me. If you cannot come during scheduled office hours, I am available by appointment and will be very happy to make one to see you.
V. MISCELLANEOUS POLICIES

Extensions and Late Work: I’d like to get comments back to you as soon as possible, but I can only do this if I receive your work promptly. I am not unreasonable, so please email me if circumstances hinder you from finishing an assignment on time. Do not email me for an extension the night before, unless you have an officially sanctioned excuse or a very creative explanation. Extenuating circumstances I understand and tolerate; procrastination I understand but do not tolerate or encourage. A good paper takes time and forethought! Late assignments will be penalized by a third of a letter grade per day (one day late=highest possible grade of A-; two days late=B+, etc.).

Discrimination & Harassment: Since some of our material may raise controversial issues, please keep in mind that the University specifically forbids discrimination and harassment on the basis of race, color, creed, religion, national or ethnic origin, gender, sexual of affectional orientation, age or handicap, or any other basis for prejudicial treatment. The University takes these issues very seriously, and so do I. You are entitled to your opinion and strongly encouraged to opine, but we are—neither you nor I—entitled or permitted to make any discriminatory or harassing remarks, either in discussion or in writing, intended or unintended.

Plagiarism: Yale considers plagiarism, or academic dishonesty of any kind, a serious offense. To me, it is the worst offense you can commit in an academic context: it is disrespectful not only to your source, but to your own intellectual integrity. Forms of plagiarism include submitting papers, or portions of papers, written by other people as your own, as well as presenting someone else’s ideas as your own without acknowledging the source. You are responsible for understanding what constitutes academic dishonesty and avoiding it. I encourage you to review the following resources so that you understand what exactly constitutes plagiarism — when in doubt, or if you have questions, don’t hesitate to talk to me or your TF: https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/writing/using-sources/understanding-and-avoiding-plagiarism http://hnun/articles/514.html Remember, plagiarizing can lead to prosecution and can affect one’s permanent record. Always acknowledge the work of others — doing so does not diminish your work, it enhances it.

University Policies: We respect and uphold University policies and regulations pertaining to the observance of religious holidays; assistance available to the physically challenged, visually and/or hearing impaired student; plagiarism; sexual harassment; and racial, ethnic or other forms of discrimination. We urge you to become familiar with the respective University regulations, and not to hesitate to bring any questions or concerns to our attention.