

ENGL 273: Contemporary Literature

➤ the Search for Meaning

Assoc. Prof. Katy Ryan

Fall 2014

Office Hours: Wed 9:00-11:00

Colson 221; kohearnr@mail.wvu.edu



I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large
so that there is room for paradoxes. —Maxine Hong Kingston

Course Description

This semester, we will ask fundamental questions about love, memory, friendship, freedom, and moral conflict. How does contemporary literature compel us to search for meaning, or not? What are ethical questions posed by contemporary writers? What is an examined life?

Our readings will consist of post-1970 novels, short stories, speeches, poems, and essays (mainly from the United States but also South Africa, England, Poland). These works consider eclectic borders— between human and nonhuman animals, between guilt and innocence, between the living and the dead. We will consider how ideas about difference and separation influence value judgments. We will also discuss how writers advance or dramatize ethical claims through logic, sentiment, science, and history. I look forward to learning from you and with you.

Course Objectives

- To build a challenging and cooperative intellectual community
- To explore a few ethical questions in select contemporary literature

Learning Outcomes/ English Major Program Goals

Upon completing a B.A. in English, a student should be able to:

1. Interpret texts within diverse literary, cultural, and historical contexts.
2. Demonstrate a general knowledge of the social and structural aspects of the English language.
3. Demonstrate a range of contextually effective writing strategies.

Upon completing this class, students should be able to:

- Analyze and reflect on complex passages in literary works
- Articulate ethical issues in contemporary life
- Effectively quote, summarize, and synthesize literary works
- Connect a text to other literary, historical, or philosophical texts
- Express ideas clearly in writing and discussion
- Respond thoughtfully to the ideas of others

Course Materials

Required Texts to be Purchased

Octavia Butler, *Kindred*

Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen, *The Exonerated*

J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*

Required Texts available on ECampus and Online

Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html

Martha Nussbaum, "Justice," *Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers*

<http://phiorg.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Nussbaum-on-Justice.pdf>

Sarah Eden Shiff, "Recovering (from) the Double: Fiction as Historical Revision in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*." *Arizona Quarterly* 65.1 (2009): 107-136. Project MUSE at WVU Library

Eleanor Novek, "Mass Culture and the American Taste for Prisons," *Peace Review* 21 (2009).

Jonathan Safran Foer, from *Eating Animals*, 1-41

Judee Norton, "Norton 59900"

Donald Barthelme, "The School"

<http://www.npr.org/programs/death/readings/stories/bart.html>

Ursula LeGuin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.

<http://www.rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/dunnweb/rprnts.omelas.pdf>

Video Clips

Martha Nussbaum, Fragility of Goodness, An Interview by Bill Moyers

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWfK1E4L--c&feature=kp>

Cornel West, *Examined Life*: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfD3X3f5C_w

Requirements

1. Reader Responses	20
2. Participation, including quotation readiness	20
3. Mid-term Exam	25
4. Take-Home Exam	35

1. Reader Responses

You will write **four** 500-word reader responses. These responses are a chance for you to respond to the literary works and to focus on a subject that interests you. Rather than taking on an entire work, concentrate on a particular scene, idea, image, or question that feels important to you.

Responses must include direct quotations from the literary text. There is a sample response on ECampus under “Course Information.” Provide the page number in parenthesis after the quote, MLA-style. Please single-space reader responses.

For two of these responses, as indicated on the schedule, you have the option of writing an analytical OR a creative response. You must write at least two analytical responses. If you would like to experiment with a creative response, here are some ideas. (You will still need to quote from the original work.)

- **Be the Author:** Write an additional scene to one of our works. Your scene should illuminate an important question or insight about the original. You can create a scene that would occur within, before, or after the text proper.
- **Create a dialogue:** Imagine a conversation between two characters. The characters could be from the same or from different literary works. Again, be sure that your creative dialogue offers an important insight into the original.
- **An Interview:** Imagine an interview with a character or the author of one of our works. Explain who is conducting the interview, where, when, etc. Your creative interview should help us to define key terms, understand difficult concepts, or make sense of a confusing part of the work.

- **Write a Letter:** Compose a letter to an author or one of the characters. This letter should discuss a real question you have about the original and work toward a meaningful argument or observation.

If you have another idea for a creative response, just run it by me.

Please upload responses on ECampus **before class** on the due dates provided on the schedule.

2. Participation, Attendance, Tardiness

Everyone is expected to contribute to class discussion. Everyone! Attendance is absolutely essential to doing well in this class. Please consider whether this is the class for you.

If this course were only about reading, we could do that by ourselves. If it were only about listening to what one person has to say about literature, we could find a great lecture. But English courses are about more than the act of reading and the acquisition of information. Literature classes also involve learning how to think critically, to communicate effectively, and to respond to the ideas of others.

I understand the pressure, uncertainty, and boredom that can lead to silence. I will do my best to create an atmosphere conducive to dialogue and open intellectual inquiry.

There are many ways that you can contribute to discussion. **I will often ask if anyone has a quotation to discuss or put on the board. This is a chance for you to direct class discussion.** In addition to quotation readiness, you can ask questions, make observations, read from your written responses, take initiative during small group work. Visiting my office hours is also a form of participation.

If you participate regularly in class discussions, which means about once a week, offering substantive comments or questions, providing quotations for consideration, you will receive 20 points. If you speak occasionally (say, one comment every 2 weeks) you will receive 15 points for discussion. If you never speak but attend regularly, you will receive 10 points. At any point, you can ask me about your participation points.

You may miss **four classes** without any penalty in terms of participation. Remember that exams will be based on class discussions.

If you miss more than four classes, you will fail the class unless you have had an emergency.

In the case of an emergency, please contact the Office of Student Affairs. I will be forwarded the needed documentation. (See “Emergencies” below)

Habitual tardiness (3 times) will constitute one absence.

3. Mid-term exam

The mid-term exam will ask you to analyze quotations, provide brief answers to questions about the readings, and compose a longer response to a conceptual or philosophical question.

4. Take-home Final exam

The final exam will be a chance for you to demonstrate your ability to synthesize, connect, and analyze literary works. I will develop the final exam from class conversations and the readings.

Classroom Environment and Policies

Grading Scale

A+ (98-100) ; A (97-94); A- (93-91); B+ (90-88); B (87-84); B- (83-81); C+ (80-78); C (77-74); C- (73-71); D+ (70-68); D (67-64); D- (63-61); F (60 or below)

Texts in Class: On discussion days, you must have the reading material with you in class. You can use electronic or print formats, but you must be able to cite directly from the works and to find references easily.

Academic Integrity: The integrity of the classes offered by any academic institution solidifies the foundation of its mission and cannot be sacrificed to expediency, ignorance, or blatant fraud. Therefore, I will enforce rigorous standards of academic integrity in all aspects and assignments of this course. For the detailed policy of West Virginia University regarding the definitions of acts considered to fall under academic dishonesty and possible ensuing sanctions, please see the Student Conduct Code

http://studentlife.wvu.edu/office_of_student_conduct/student_conduct_code.

Should you have any questions about possibly improper research citations or references, or any other activity that may be interpreted as an attempt at academic dishonesty, please see me before the assignment is due to discuss the matter.

Social Justice: The West Virginia University community is committed to creating and fostering a positive learning and working environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and inclusion. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Accessibility Services (293-6700). For more information on West Virginia University's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, please see <http://diversity.wvu.edu>.

Emergencies or Health Crises. If you have an emergency or serious health problem in the course of the semester, you or your family should contact the Office of Student Life in E. Moore

Hall (293-5611). The Dean of Student Life will communicate with me and authorize arrangements. Please reserve the Dean's services for emergencies.

ECampus/Blackboard/MIX

Short readings are linked on the syllabus and available to download from Ecampus. Dedicate time early in the semester to familiarizing yourself with Ecampus.

On days when we are reading an electronic text, be sure that you print the text, take detailed notes, and/or have an e-copy in class.

On due dates, you will need to upload reader responses **before** class time. I will communicate with you about your written work (and the class generally) through MIX. Please check your MIX account often.

Schedule

Tues. Aug 19: Introductions. Syllabus. Ethical questions that matter to you?

Thurs. Aug 21: **Bring at least two quotations from this speech to share with class. What do you think the main message is?**

Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize Speech (handout and ECampus)

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html

**If you are absent on this day, you will need to compose a 300-word response to the speech. Your response should quote from the text and indicate your understanding of the entire speech.

Tues. Aug 26: From Plato, quoting Socrates, in *The Apology*:

“if I say again that the greatest good of man is daily to converse about virtue, and all that concerning which you hear me examining myself and others, and that the life which is unexamined is not worth living—that you are still less likely to believe. And yet what I say is true.”

In class: Cornel West, from *Examined Life*

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfD3X3f5C_w (13 min)

In class: Martha Nussbaum, “The Fragility of Goodness,” from Bill Moyers Interview: beginning - 12:09

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWfK1E4L--c&feature=kp>

**If you are absent on this day, you will need to compose a 300-word response to the reading and video clips. Your response should quote from the texts and indicate your understanding of key terms and references.

Thurs. Aug 28 Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1-51)

Tues. Sept. 2 Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (52-107)
First Reader Response to *Kindred* due (creative or analytical)

Thurs. Sept. 4 Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (108-189)

Tues. Sept 9 Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (190-264)

Optional Creative Writing Event : GEORGE SINGLETON (fiction): Tuesday, Sept. 9, 7:30 p.m., 130 Colson

Thurs. Sept 11 Sarah Eden Shiff, "Recovering (from) the Double: Fiction as Historical Revision in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*." *Arizona Quarterly* 65.1 (2009): 107-136. Find in Project MUSE
Bring to class two questions or observations about this essay.

Optional Creative Writing Event: KELLY MOFFETT (poetry; MFA alum): Monday, Sept. 15, 11 a.m., 130 Colson

Tues. Sept 16 Eleanor Novek, "Mass Culture and the American Taste for Prisons," *Peace Review* 21 (2009). ECampus.

James Poniewozik, "Why I Watch Reality TV with my Kids," *Time* 6/17/2013, Vol. 181, Issue 23. ECampus.

Thurs. Sept 18 *The Exonerated* 1-45

Optional Creative Writing Event: MICHAEL BLUMENTHAL (fiction): Thursday, Sept. 18, 7:30 p.m., Robinson Reading Room

Tues. Sept 23 *The Exonerated* (entire play)
Study Guide for Midterm

- Thurs. Sept 25 *The Exonerated*
Second Reader Response to *The Exonerated* due (analytical)
 REACH Coalition <http://reachcoalition.wordpress.com/about/>
- Tues. Sept 30 Judee Norton, "Norton 59900." ECampus.
 Appalachian Prison Book Project [aprisonbookproject@wordpress.com](http://aprisonbookproject.wordpress.com)
- Thurs. Oct 2 Julianne Chiaet, "Novel Finding: Reading Literary Fiction Improves Empathy." *Scientific American* Oct 4, 2013
<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/novel-finding-reading-literary-fiction-improves-empathy/>
 Tom McKay, "Psychologists Find a Surprising Thing Happens to Kids Who Read Harry Potter," *Arts.Mic* 30 July 2014.
<http://mic.com/articles/95236/psychologists-find-a-surprising-thing-happens-to-kids-who-read-harry-potter>
 Harold Bloom, "Dumbing Down American Readers," *Boston Globe* Sept 24, 2003.
http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2003/09/24/dumbing_down_american_readers/
- Tues. Oct 7 **Midterm Exam**
- Thurs. Oct 9 Donald Barthelme, "The School." ECampus.
<http://www.npr.org/programs/death/readings/stories/bart.html>
- Tues. Oct 14 **Fall Break—no class** (Read ahead!)
- Thurs. Oct 16 Ursula LeGuin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." ECampus.
<http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/dunnweb/rprnts.omelas.pdf>
- Optional Creative Writing Event: MARIANNE BORUCH (poetry; Sturm writer-in-residence): Thursday, October 16, 7:30 p.m., Robinson
- Tues. Oct 21 Jonathan Saffron Foer, from *Eating Animals*, 1-41
- Thurs. Oct 23 Jonathan Saffron Foer, from *Eating Animals*, 1-41

Note: Oct 24—last day to drop with a W

- Tues. Oct 28 *The Lives of Animals* : The Philosophers and the Animals 15-45
- Thurs. Oct 30 *The Lives of Animals* : The Poets and the Animals 46-69
- Tues. Nov 4 **Election Day--no class**
- Thurs. Nov 6 Reflection in *Lives of Animals* by Marjorie Garber 73-84
W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats"
<http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/memory-w-b-yeats>
Reflection in *Lives of Animals* by Peter Singer 85-91
Third Reader Response to *Lives of Animals* (the fiction by Coetzee) due (creative or analytical)
- Tues. Nov 11 Reflection in *Lives of Animals* by Wendy Doniger 93-106
Reflection in *Lives of Animals* by Barbara Smuts 107-120
- Thurs. Nov 13 Introduction by Amy Guttmann to *The Lives of Animals*, 3-11
- Tues. Nov 18 Benjamin Zaphaniah, "Talking Turkeys"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocJABWJEfPk>
- Interview with Zaphaniah. ECampus
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jan/18/benjamin-zephaniah-interview-poet>
- Thurs. Nov 20 Wislawa Szymborska, "Brueghal's Two Monkeys." ECampus.

Thanksgiving Break

- Tues. Dec 2 Martha Nussbaum, "Justice" in *Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers*, ed. Astra Taylor. ECampus.
<http://phiorg.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Nussbaum-on-Justice.pdf>
- Fourth Response to one of the essays or poems we have read since Nov. 11 (analytical)**
- Thurs. Dec 4 Discussion of Take-Home
- Tues. Dec 9 Review and Final Thoughts