ENGL 205-16 Literature and the Moral Imagination: The Problem of Evil

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Literature and the Moral Imagination:
The Problem of Evil

Texts:
Poe, *The Gold-Bug and Other Tales* (recommended edition: Dover)
Faulkner, *Sanctuary*
Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*
McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*
Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*

Course Description:
This course is taught mainly through discussion, though there will be some lecturing, especially on the days we begin a new work. *Students should also expect occasional unannounced quizzes.* These quizzes are designed primarily to check your basic knowledge of the text (characters, plot, who said what, etc.); they will not be interpretive. Final grades are based on three exams (20% each) and two essays (15% each), with an additional 10% for quizzes and class participation.

This section of Literature and the Moral Imagination is part of the Ethics/Religion and Society focus within Xavier’s Core Curriculum, and fulfills that requirement. It is intended as a course in which significant works of literature are studied as representations or examinations of ethical and religious issues, in order to demonstrate how literature can further our understanding of these dimensions of human life. In literature (as in the other arts), what may be called the “moral imagination” *raises questions* about ethics, religion and society; it rarely, if ever, provides definitive answers, leaving readers with the responsibility to interpret these matters on their own. This course, therefore, is as much about literary interpretation as it is about ethics or religion. Thus, it complements (and complicates) the concerns of the philosophy and theology courses that are also required in the E/RS focus.

Course goals:

- to learn to read literature deeply and carefully, and develop reasonable interpretations of literary texts.
- to develop as writers of literary criticism within accepted norms of the genre.
- to become critical thinkers in regard to the literary texts and themes of the course, as well as to the other concerns of the ER/S focus.
Most sections of ENGL 205 are currently taught with emphasis on a particular topic or theme, and such is the case in this class. Our topic is the problem of evil. Since antiquity, philosophy and religion have addressed this problem, and it has informed literary works of every genre. What is the origin of evil, and what is it nature? How does its existence challenge belief and faith in God? How are we to understand the psychology of evil when we encounter it in others—and in ourselves? How does our response to evil shape our ethical behavior, both in our personal and our political lives? Because this is a literature course, we will not work with these questions in the abstract. Rather, we will study how a group of authors, working mainly in the genre of prose narrative, represent evil in the lives and actions of specific characters in carefully developed stories and settings. We will, no doubt, have recourse to traditional philosophical and religious ideas about evil, but our main goal will be to understand how literature, given its unique powers, can provide us with insights into this most basic human problem.

**Course Policies**

**Attendance.** Regular attendance is a requirement of this course. I will permit two unexcused absences per semester. More missed classes will adversely affect your grade. If a problem of any sort arises, please get in touch with me. We can usually work it out.

**Lateness.** Coming late to class is rude and disruptive, and indicates a lack of respect for your instructor and your fellow students. I expect you to arrive on time. If you do come late, please slip in unobtrusively. If I see that you are chronically late (that is, more than a couple of times in a row), then we need to talk.

**Cell phones.** Cell phone use is forbidden. Upon entering the classroom, if not before, turn off your phone immediately and remove it from your desk. Don’t even think of texting during class—I will ask you to leave.

**Laptops and Tablets.** I permit the use of laptops and tablets in class, because I know that some students legitimately use them to take notes and read electronic versions of the texts. However, I reserve the right to stroll over behind you and take a look at the screen. If I see Facebook pictures of your best friend getting drunk last Saturday night, you will be invited to continue your viewing outside of the classroom.

**Email.** Check you Xavier email at least twice between classes for course updates, assignments, additional materials, etc. Feel free to email me with your questions, comments and concerns. I usually turn off my computer about 10 PM, so if you email me at 3 AM, don’t expect an answer till at least noon on the next day. A good start to your email is “Dear Dr. Finkelstein.” “Hey” just doesn’t cut it.

**Papers.** Papers are to be turned in at the start of class on the day they are due. Papers sent by email will not be accepted. Papers turned in by noon on the following day to my mailbox in Hinkle Hall will be accepted, graded and returned, with no comments and no opportunities for rewrites. Papers will not be accepted after this time—the grade for the assignment will be an automatic F. Rewrite policy: I encourage you to rewrite your paper if you receive a grade in
the C range or lower. A grade of F requires a rewrite. Please meet with me before you begin rewriting. Turn in your first version along with your rewrite on the due date we agree upon.

Plagiarism. From the Xavier Catalog: “All work submitted for academic evaluation must be the student's own. Certainly, the activities of other scholars will influence all students. However, the direct and unattributed use of another's efforts is prohibited as is the use of any work untruthfully submitted as one's own. Penalties for violations of this policy may include one or more of the following: a zero for that assignment or test, an "F" in the course, and expulsion from the University. The dean of the college in which the student is enrolled is to be informed in writing of all such incidents, though the teacher has full authority to assign the grade for the assignment, test, or course. If disputes of interpretation arise, the student, faculty member, and chair should attempt to resolve the difficulty. If this is unsatisfactory, the dean will rule in the matter. As a final appeal, the academic vice president will call a committee of tenured faculty for the purpose of making a final determination.”

Calendar

Jan. 7  Introduction / Macbeth Acts I & II
Jan. 14  Macbeth Acts III, IV, & V
Jan. 21  MLK Day—NO CLASS
Jan. 28  Poe (stories t.b.a.)
Feb. 4  Poe / Lovecraft (stories t.b.a)
Feb. 11  Lovecraft  Paper #1 due
Feb. 18  Exam #1
Feb. 25  Spring Break—NO CLASS
March 4  Faulkner
March 11  Faulkner
March 18  Faulkner / Highsmith
March 25  Highsmith
April 1  Exam #2 / McCarthy
April 8  McCarthy  Paper #2 due
April 15  Levi
April 22  Levi
April 29  Exam #3