205-01 Literature and the Moral Imagination: Responding to Evil

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ENGL 205-01 (For English majors and minors)
Literature and the Moral Imagination: Responding to Evil
Spring 2014
Dr. Getz

CONTEXT:
ENGL 205 is a required part of the Ethics/Religion and Society Focus in Xavier’s core curriculum. This course was created for the E/RS Focus to help students reflect on issues in these three related areas and develop their own positions by studying some important ways literature has dealt with them.

DESIRED OUTCOMES
Students will demonstrate in writing and class discussion:
- an understanding of the basic argument of Habits of the Heart and the ability to use its terminology;
- the ability to read challenging literary texts in various genres with understanding and develop their own interpretations of them;
- the ability to use basic research tools in British and American literature;
- the ability to reflect intelligently on aesthetic and ethical issues raised by the readings;
- the ability to synthesize readings and discussion in this course with material from PHIL 100 and THEO 111.

Students will demonstrate the ability to write clear, organized, and well-developed essays of various lengths. These essays should show original insight into the texts and issues in the course, provide textual support for those insights, and be sound in grammar, punctuation, and style.

As a key course in the E/RS Focus, the “core of the core curriculum,” ENGL 205 contributes to the fulfillment of all goals of the core curriculum (except as they refer specifically to mathematics, science and foreign language) and shares their student learning outcomes. (For a list of core goals and outcomes, contact the Professor.)

TOPIC:
The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, rightly shocked most Americans and many people around the world; but while acknowledging the evil of those acts and the suffering they have caused, a viewer of history sees that they are not without precedent. During the Civil War, a war fought in part over the evil of slavery, Americans killed each other so persistently that after four years more than 600,000 were dead--more Americans than were killed in World War II and 200 times the number killed in the terrorist attacks. September 11 isn’t even close to being the bloodiest single day on American soil. On September 17, 1862, 23,000 soldiers
were killed in the battle of Antietam, with losses evenly divided between Union and Confederate forces. The Civil War was also the first modern total war waged against the enemy’s economy and civilian population as well as its soldiers. With modern technology in the twentieth century, total war reached a scale the world had never before seen. The carnage of World War I, the London blitz, the firebombing of Dresden, and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki come quickly to mind. Ethnic persecution and attempted genocide also reached unprecedented depths in the Holocaust, which killed at least six million people, most of them Jews. Since World War II we’ve seen the killing fields of Cambodia, ethnic cleansing in the countries that used to be Yugoslavia, and so many other horrors that some observers call the past hundred or so years the century of atrocity. And these examples don’t even include such less glaring but even more prevalent sources of suffering as domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, violence in our streets, poverty, hunger, and others each of us could add from our own lives.

This presence--some would say dominance--of evil in our world demands responses from us and raises questions we’ll focus on this semester. They can be organized into three groups:

1. The nature of evil: What is it, and how do we recognize it in individuals and societies? Is a distinction between physical evil, such as tsunamis and hurricanes, and moral evil useful? What standards do we use in this process? Is the writer correct who argues that calling terrorist acts evil gives them too much dignity? He believes we should simply call such acts crimes and punish them accordingly. Remember too that some people see the terrorist attacks as noble, even holy acts. By what standards do we define goodness and/or heroism in individuals and societies? Is there a hierarchy of goods and evils: what is the worst evil and the highest good? Is structural evil as bad as overtly evil acts?

2. The sources of evil: Is it part of human nature as a result of original sin or our aggressive self-interest, is it a product of human culture, or is it a reaction to the injustices of racism or other forms of prejudice and discrimination or economic inequities? Why does evil often seem more interesting than good?

3. Responses to evil or possible solutions for it: Can only God’s help save us from evil, can we find goodness in human nature, or can we defeat evil by reforming human institutions? What role do/should governments and other institutions play in this process? Must violent evil be met with a violent response? Does the distinction in *Habits of the Heart* among the three kinds of justice--procedural, distributive, and substantive--help us construct a better society? Are the only important forms of growth individual, or can we responsibly believe in and work for progress in society?

We’ll use the answers our readings suggest to the above questions and others as help in formulating our own responses. The sociology book *Habits of the Heart*, a study of the conflict between individualism and community in American values, will provide a framework for our discussion; but since we’re taking on such large questions, our literary readings will draw on broader historical and cultural perspectives.
We’ll study British and American literature from the Renaissance to our own day. Our literary selections will provide a variety of religious and secular perspectives on the ethical dilemmas they portray.

Because this course is designed to encourage thought and dialogue about the readings and our own values, classes will usually follow a discussion format, sometimes involving group work. The more you participate, the more you’ll get out of the course.

PREMISES FOR CONSIDERATION:

Because literature attempts to capture the complexity of human experience, it is an important part of a culture’s effort to illuminate and resolve moral dilemmas. 

Because literature is written and read in history, not in a vacuum, aesthetic concerns cannot be completely separated from social and political issues.

Our responses to literary texts are themselves texts worthy of study.

ASSIGNMENTS:

Six critical essays, ranging in length from two to six pages, word processed. Topics will be assigned.
Brief writing in class may be assigned at any time.
A final project. See attached sheet for instructions.

OFFICE HOURS:

240 Hinkle Hall
M 12:30-4:30 and 6:00-7:00, and W 12:00-4:00; other times by appointment.
Office phone: 745-3627. If I don’t answer after four rings, voice mail will be activated.
Please leave a message.
E-mail address: getz@xavier.edu

GRADING:

Short paper on Habits of the Heart counts 5%.
Four four-page papers (on I Henry IV; Paradise Lost; Go Down, Moses; and Song of Solomon) total 40%.
One six-page paper on Persuasion and The Awakening counts 15%.
Class work counts 20%. The grade for class work will be based on your panel presentation and the quality and consistency of your daily participation as well as any
writing done in class. Good questions are a valuable contribution. Sometimes individually or in pairs students will be required to prepare brief answers to questions for informal presentation in class. As majors and minors you have a special responsibility to prepare for class and contribute to the dialogue.

NOTE: Although class participation demands more than physical presence, it assumes promptness and faithful attendance. Any unexcused absence and/or frequent lateness will lower your grade for class work. I don’t want you to come to class sick and risk spreading germs to others; but if you miss class because of illness, let me know by phone or e-mail. In-class writing or other assignments missed because of unexcused absence may not be made up and will receive the grade of zero.

Final project counts 20%.

PREREQUISITE:

The prerequisite for this course is ENGL 115 Rhetoric or an approved substitute. Papers and essays on tests must meet the standards of English composition. Grades will be based on quality of writing as well as content.

SUGGESTION:

If possible, buy all your books now because the bookstore may send them back before we get to them.

NOTES:

You must give credit for any idea you borrow from another writer, even if you put it into your own words. Otherwise, you’ll be guilty of plagiarism and subject to the sanctions listed in the statement on academic honesty in the XU Catalog.

Anyone who feels he/she may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability (e.g.: sensory, learning, psychological, medical, mobility) should contact me to arrange an appointment to discuss your needs as soon as possible. I rely on the Disability Services Office for assistance in verifying your eligibility for academic accommodations related to your disability. If you have not previously contacted Disability Services, I encourage you to do so at 513-745-3280 on the Fifth Floor of the Conaton Learning Commons, Room 514, or e-mail Cassandra Jones at jonesc20@xavier.edu, to coordinate reasonable accommodations.
WORKING SCHEDULE

A more specific schedule will be distributed for each literary text.

Wed., Jan. 15: Habits of the Heart (HH), vii-xlvi and 3-26. Select the interviewee who is closest to your values and the one who is furthest from your values, and be ready to explain why.


REFLECTION PAPER DUE locating yourself in reference to a tradition discussed in HH or constructing your ideal society.

Mon., Jan. 27-Fri., Feb. 7: William Shakespeare, 1 Henry IV (1596-97)


Fri., Apr. 11-Fri., Apr. 25: Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon (1977)

Mon., Apr. 28-Wed., Apr. 30: Two postmodern short stories (available online)
John Barth, “Lost in the Funhouse” (1968)
Grace Paley, “A Conversation with My Father” (1972)

Fri., May 2: Review

Fri., May 9 FINAL PROJECT DUE in oral and written form during exam period, 8:00-9:50