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PHL 429.01: Philosophy in Literature

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Philosophy 429/Philosophy and Literature

Fall 2018

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Course Description:

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum claims that there are certain moral truths that can only be represented in literary prose, i.e., in narrative. She also argues that the act of carefully reading literature engages and develops readers' moral sensibilities and prepares us for moral life, while most (all?) analytic treatments of moral life fall far short. We'll assess Nussbaum's claims as we work slowly and lovingly through two short stories, an autobiography of a sort, a play, and a film, in which characters explicitly examine what it means to be a moral self and attempt to construct a self. The overriding question is: What can literature help us discover about the moral self that analytic philosophy misses all together, seriously obscures, or dismisses as irrelevant to moral life? And how, specifically, does literature work its magic? Here's how the semester looks.

Dates:

8/28 Hello

8/30 "Folie A Deux," William Trevor (x)

9/4-6 Nussbaum, chapter 1 (**S on 9/4**) & "Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee, Iris Murdoch

9/11 "The Self in Moral Space," Charles Taylor (x)

9/13 Reread "Folie A Deux," I'll model a presentation

9/18-20 "The Idea of Perfection" & "On 'God' and 'Good'," Iris Murdoch (**S on 9/18**)

9/25 Nussbaum, chapter 4

9/27 Nussbaum, chapter 5 (**S on 9/27**)

10/2-4 *A Poetry Handbook*, Mary Oliver; various poems (x)

10/11-25 *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston (Finish the book by 10/11)

10/9 NO CLASS

10/30-11/1 Nussbaum, chapter 2

(E at the beginning of class 11/1)

11/6 Election Day, PLEASE VOTE, NO CLASS

11/8-20 *Hamlet* (Finish the play by 11/8 and read it at least twice!)

11/27-11/29 "A Heart in Winter" discussion (You'll need to watch the film on your own time.)

12/4 "Home," Anton Chekhov (x)

(E on 12/6 at the beginning of class)

12/6 The End

Texts

Love's Knowledge, Martha Nussbaum

The Woman Warrior, Maxine Hong Kingston

Hamlet, Shakespeare

Existentialists and Mystics, Iris Murdoch

A Poetry Handbook, Mary Oliver

(x)—I'll give you copies of these articles

Requirements

1) 2 2-3 page discussion papers. You can turn these in any time, but no more than 1 a week: 15 %

2) 3 2-3 page synopsis papers. I'll assign the passages. See **(S)** on the syllabus for due dates: 15%

2) 2 essay papers (5-6 pages). I'll assign the topics. See **(E)** for due dates: 30%

3) A final paper that's a revision and expansion of one of the 2 shorter papers (10-12 pages)—30%

(Note: Graduate students need to write longer papers to satisfy Graduate School requirements for graduate credit: essay papers—8 pages; final paper--15 pages, approx.)

4) Presentation on a very focused passage from one of our literary texts or film. You'll work with a partner on this—10%

I *highly* recommend you read each piece of literature twice.

Law and Order

1.) Attendance and participation— **This is primarily a discussion class, so attendance and participation are mandatory.**

2.) I consider the following rude and unacceptable: ringing cell phones, open lap tops, reading the newspaper or working on something other than class materials in class, whispering to your neighbor, texting, coming into class late or leaving early (unless you've okayed this with me), in other words anything that keeps you or other students from giving me your full attention. I'll call you out for these things just once. After that, I simply drop you from the class. Please just be considerate, responsible adults, and we'll get on fine.

3.) See the University of Montana Student Conduct Code re. cheating, etc.

(<http://www.umt.edu.SA>) .

Synopsis Papers (S)

You will simply write a thorough and detailed summary of an assigned passage in one of our readings. Usually I'll ask you to summarize and/or untangle an important and complicated argument.

Discussion Papers

Do not summarize! Please bring your own insights to the table. Hone in on a **specific** problem or twist, that “Ahaaaaa...”moment you have as you stumble across something puzzling, or wrong-headed, or a point that somehow sheds light on an idea we’ve talked about previously. Tell me something I don’t already know and that isn’t obvious. Stay focused. Work with a very specific idea rather than with an unwieldy, general one.

Discussion Questions for *Ceremony*

Ceremony is another story about the power of stories/narratives. Specifically, it's about a man who doesn't have a story, which is a big part of his sickness. And it's a story about how stories can heal or cause sickness. *Ceremony*, the novel itself, is a ceremony, a story that is meant to be healing.

Read all the book by 5/1

This time I'm relying on all of you to make appropriate connections between the novel, Taylor, and Nussbaum. So be thinking about the philosophical implications as you answer your questions.

- 1) What is Tayo's sickness? Go beyond the obvious. Work with specific passages, especially the first paragraph of the book. Look at word choice, repetition, voices, sounds the words make, voices, and more. How does this foreshadow the rest of the story? (Geoff)
- 2) Discuss how and why (give at least 3 reasons) Silko has constructed such a disjointed narrative for the first half of the book. Again, work with specific passages. (Alyssa)
- 3) Discuss at least 3 ceremonies in the book. Go beyond the obvious. Take us to specific passages. (Hayden)
- 4) What is the significance of "half-breeds"? Who are they? (Joel)
- 5) Who is the woman that Tayo meets on p. 176? Go beyond the obvious. What function does she serve in Tayo's story? (Megan)
- 6) What kind of work are the traditional stories/poetry doing in the book? Work with specific examples/passages. (Brice)

Give special attention to the following passages, as they're relevant to your questions:

- (a) 5-6; look for the significance of the belly and find relevant passages (Geoff)
- (b) 31-34; 114-118; 131-134; 181-183; 230-238 (Hayden and Alyssa)
- (c) 38-40; 60-64; 50-58 (Joel)
- (d) 86-92; 164-168; 205-215 (Megan)
- (e) 129-131; 118-120; 122-128; Hummingbird and fly (Brice)

Viewing Questions for A Heart in Winter
Please reread Nussbaum p. 75-84!

1. Compare Maxime and Stephan as personalities. Describe their relationship. Are they friends?
2. Why do you think Stephan pursues (or does he?) Camille? Go beyond the obvious here. If he does pursue her, why does he pull back (or does he?)?
3. Nussbaum says that those who are emotionally sensitive/intelligent can perceive certain relevant features of a situation that the intellect alone may well miss. Are some characters in the film more emotionally intelligent than others? (Remember, it's possible to be under- and overly sensitive.).
4. Characterize Stephan's relationship with LaCharme, the old violin teacher. How and why is it different from his relationship with Maxime?
5. Why won't Stephan take a stand in the dinner conversation at LaCharme's? Are Regine's and Camille's criticisms of him fair?
6. At the beginning of the film, Stephan says to his friend the book vendor that love is beautiful in books, in writing, but he seems skeptical about love in the concrete. Does he come to understand love better or not? See Nussbaum on the emotions and cognition, in particular.

Reading Questions for *The Folded Leaf*

1. In part, this novel is about fathers and sons. Describe the relationships between Lymie and his father and between Spud and his father. Explore this important interlocutor relationship. Work with specifics from Taylor's notion of framework, among other things. How can fathers fail sons? Where do mothers fit in?
2. In part, the novel is about male friendships. Explore this interlocutor community. What kinds of friendships are represented in the novel? What kinds of emotions drive these relationships? What kinds of emotions are blocked and why? Do these relationships mirror father-son relationships in any respects? How do men's relationships with each other differ from their relationships with women? Why?
3. The male body as well as homoerotic desire and tension are explored. Compare and contrast the characterization of the male body in this novel to the characterization of the female body in *The Woman Warrior*? How is the body central to identity in both novels? Is homoerotic desire a moral good in *The Folded Leaf*? If so, are there any goods it conflicts with? (There's no right or wrong answer here. I'm just interested in exploring this theme some.)
4. Life is a journey. See chapters 18 and 31. What's the goal?

More questions coming!

Recently the *New Yorker* ran an article on William Maxwell. There's a resurgence of interest in his novels and short stories. I'll get that article on reserve for you in L.A. 101, should you have an interest in him.

Reading and Discussion Questions for “Folie A Deux”

1. How is silence significant to the story? Relate this to Taylor’s discussion of interlocutors. Look at specific pieces of diction, images, and metaphors.
2. See page 64, where the author uses the phrase “muddled by bewilderment.” Relate this to the characters’ maturation of a moral self.
3. Are the characters emotionally intelligent? See Nussbaum, page 40. Work with specifics.
4. How might a “perceptive, finely aware and richly responsible” reader judge these children’s act? Are Anthony and Wilby finely aware and richly responsible judges of themselves and each other? See Nussbaum on “finely aware and richly responsible.”
5. How does one live with a wrong that can’t be made right or made amends for? Your view? What seems to be the author’s view? The characters’ views?
6. See Nussbaum’s response on page 46, bottom, to the issue of whether a complex philosophical example would be as morally instructive and satisfying as a story. Take a position and use “Folie” to illustrate it.