Honors Humanities Seminar
Great Works of Literature and Culture from Homer to Dante

Fall 2022

Mark W. Roche ALHN13950 - 03

Logistical Information

Class: Monday and Wednesday afternoons from 3:30 to 4:45 in DeBartolo Hall 347.

Office: 349 Decio Hall.

Tentative Advising Hours: Mondays from 12:30 to 2:00 and Wednesdays from 1:30 to 3:00 as well as by appointment. Impromptu meetings can also often be arranged before or after class. Note that if too many students report conflicts during these hours, I will select different times and then update the syllabus as well as Canvas.

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Brief Description

In this two-semester seminar students read and interpret major works of literature, philosophy, art, and film. We explore three worlds--ancient Greece, Christianity, and modernity–with an eye to learning not only *about* the past but also *from* the past. Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Augustine, Dante, Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Molière, Goethe, Hegel, Dickinson, Nietzsche, Wilde, Kafka, and contemporaries such as Natasha Tretheway are among the writers explored. A range of great questions will guide us: What is of greatest value? What forms does evil take? What is the relation of conflict and identity? What are the best paths to human flourishing?

Full Description

What makes the enduring works of the Western and the Christian traditions great? What fascinating questions do their works address, and what makes their works aesthetically appealing? How have they captured the imagination of audiences for generations? What in those works is universal and what is historically contingent? Can we learn from both aspects? What do such works have to tell us today?

In the fall semester of this year-long seminar we will read and discuss some of the most interesting and enduring literary figures, philosophers, and theologians from the classical and medieval world. In the spring we will continue with a selection of great and fascinating works,

primarily from the early modern period to the present.

Among the questions that will engage us, here is just a sampling. You will be adding many more of your own questions and reformulating the few examples below:

What is our descriptive and normative understanding of humanity?
What is the role of conflict and alienation in human society?
What are the conditions of an ideal dialogue in search of truth?
What is the relation of consensus and truth?

What is the value of studying literature?
What questions, categories, and vocabulary can help us better understand and enjoy literature?
What can we learn from the tragic and the comic?
What is the connection between ambiguity and aesthetic value?

What constitutes identity?
How are identity crises related to historical developments?
What is the role of deception and self-deception in life?
What role does suffering play in our understanding of humanity?
What is the relation of truth to suffering?
What is justice?
What are the best paths to human flourishing?

What is evil, and how does it shield and reveal itself?
Why is evil so fascinating to us and also so difficult to combat?

In what ways is God just? In what ways is God merciful?
What are the greatest Christian virtues?
How might we best come to know and love God?

Principles of Student Learning

The course will be organized in accordance with several common-sense pedagogical principles, most of which were embodied already by Socrates and which have been given empirical verification in our age:

- *Active Learning*: Students are not passive minds into whose heads content is to be poured. Students learn by becoming involved, asking questions, engaging in discussions, solving problems, defending positions, writing and rewriting papers, in short, by energetically devoting themselves to the learning process. Educators speak of active or student-centered learning. Students learn most effectively when they are actively engaged, not simply listening or absorbing material. In fact simply taking an exam, even when you perform poorly, helps you to learn the material. Accordingly, this course will be student-centered, with considerable focus on student-student discussion, written contributions to a

peer sounding board, paper topics chosen by students, one-on-one oral examinations, and student-led discussions. When you have the opportunity to help teach a work, you will see that your learning is deepened.

- *Peer Learning*: Students learn greatly from their peers. You are influenced by the people with whom you spend your time, for good or for ill. Who among your friends awakens your most noble intellectual passions and helps you become a better interlocutor and person? The research shows that the student's peer group is the single greatest source of influence on cognitive and affective development in college. We will enjoy many student-student discussions in which the teacher simply plays a guiding role. You are also encouraged to discuss our various texts and questions with one another and with others beyond the classroom.

- *Existential Engagement*: Students learn more when they are existentially engaged in the subject, when they care about the questions under discussion and recognize their significance. If you volunteer in a soup kitchen, your course on the economics of poverty takes on a different meaning. If you spend a semester in Berlin, German history and politics become far more important to you. To that end and because of their intrinsic value, we will read these works not only to understand them in their own context, as interesting as that is, but also to ask, to what extent they speak to us today. Can we learn not only *about* these works, but also *from* them? That means relating these works to your past experiences, daily lives, and future aspirations, without falling into a purely subjective interpretation of the meaning.

- *Intrinsic Motivation*: Motivation plays a large role in learning. The best learning comes not from external motivation, seeking external approbation and praise, but from intrinsic motivation, from identification with a vision of wanting to learn.

- *High Expectations and Feedback*: Students learn the most when their teachers have high academic expectations of them and when students receive helpful feedback that supports them in their quest to meet those high expectations. To know what you don't know is to help focus your learning. A combination of being challenged and being supported helps learning immensely. You can be sure that if the coach of an athletic team is nonchalant about physical fitness, discipline, timing, teamwork, and the like, the team will not win many games. So, too, an easy A will not help you in the long run, as you interview for highly competitive postgraduate fellowships or positions at the best graduate schools or with the leading firms. The best way to learn is to shoot very high and to recognize what might still be needed to meet those high aspirations. Detailed feedback and discriminating grades are ways of pointing out strengths and weaknesses to students, challenging them to stretch, so that they are not lulled into thinking that their current capacities cannot be improved, and they needn't learn more.

- *Effortful Learning*: Many think that easier paths to learning make for better learning. In truth, the evidence shows that easier learning is often superficial and quickly forgotten,

whereas effortful learning leads to deeper and more durable learning as well as greater mastery and better applications. For example, trying to solve a problem before being taught a solution leads to better learning. Hard learning, making mistakes and correcting them, is not wasted effort but important work; it improves your intelligence. Striving to surpass your current abilities and experiencing setbacks are part of true learning, which, unlike superficial learning, develops and changes the brain, building new connections and increasing intellectual capacities. For better learning, difficulties are desirable: the harder the effort, the greater the benefit. For example, instead of simply reviewing notes on our readings, you might reflect on the reading: What are the key ideas? What ideas are new to me? How would I explain them to someone else? How are the ideas conveyed? How does what I read relate to what I already know? What questions do I have? What arguments speak for and against a given position?

- *Breadth of Context*: If you put what you are learning into a larger context and connect it with what you already know and are learning in your other courses, your learning will be deeper and more stable. If you can connect a story, an idea, or a principle as you uncover it to other stories, ideas, and principles or to what you yourself think, then the stories, ideas, and principles will be more likely to resonate for you in the future. In our class, seeing connections across works as well as seeing connections between our discussions and discussions and works in other classes as well as your own life will help give you that larger context. The more you know, the more you can learn. Ask yourself, what larger lessons can be drawn from what I am exploring and analyzing.

- *Faculty-Student Contact*. The greatest predictor of student satisfaction with college is frequent interaction with faculty members. Students are more motivated, more committed, and more involved and seem to learn more when they have a connection to faculty members. So take advantage of opportunities to connect with your teachers. Drop in during my office hours (come when you have a need or a question or simply when you would like to chat). Take advantage as well of other opportunities we will find for informal conversations. And don't hesitate to ask for help.

- *Meaningful Investment of Time*: Students who major in disciplines that are less demanding of students' time tend to make fewer cognitive gains in college. Everyone who wants to learn a complex and demanding subject must make a substantial effort. Learning occurs not only during class time. It derives also from the investment you make in learning, the quality of the time you spend reading, thinking, writing, and speaking with others outside of class. For this three-credit honors seminar you will want to spend more than six hours per week preparing. An advantage you have in this course is that the works are challenging and fun, so your study can be work and pleasure simultaneously.

- *Diversity*: Another learning principle is diversity. When you discover that your roommate is Muslim, you suddenly become more curious about Islam. That is not especially likely at Notre Dame, so we need to cultivate intellectual diversity, engaging works from other cultures and in languages other than English, even if our access to them in this particular

class is via translation. We want to hear different perspectives from one another, even the most unusual, since thinking outside the box can help us see more clearly. Do not be shy about asking off-the-wall questions or making unusual comments. And don't let contrary views bother you emotionally. All such contributions can be useful, as the process of discovering truth involves listening to various perspectives. In addition, many of the works we will study introduce us to radically different world-views from our own, but precisely in their difference, they may provide interesting antidotes to some of the cliches of the present.

- *Self-Reflection*: Students learn more when they are aware of how they best learn (so that they can focus their energies), what they most lack, and how they can learn more. How can I become a better student? How can I learn to guide myself? We may occasionally have meta-discussions in which we reflect on our discussion at a higher level. Around what central interpretive question did the debate we were just having revolve? Why did we relinquish one interpretation and adopt another? How would we describe the evidence that spoke for and against the various positions? Why was today's discussion particularly successful or less successful? What is helping us learn? The latter question underscores why I have just placed these principles before you.

Learning Goals

1) Engagement with Great Works and Great Questions: Students will gain insight into a selection of important works. Students will grow in their appreciation of the value of reading great works and asking great questions as part of a life-long process of continual learning. In so doing, they will cultivate their enjoyment of the life of the mind, building resources for the continued development of their inner world, and they will learn to value complexity and ambiguity. In relating to these works and questions in a personal way, they will also recognize a strong relationship between their academic work and personal lives.

2) Cultural Literacy: Students will become familiar with a selection of the most influential literary and cultural works of the Western tradition. This will enhance their intellectual resources and help them to become more adept in their encounters with others, who might take knowledge of various authors and works for granted. That is, students will increase their exposure to the kinds of works one says that every educated person should have encountered and which have been part of most well-educated persons' repertoire across the ages. This knowledge will also allow them to make greater sense of the intellectual-historical patterns and resources that have contributed to our current debates and questions. Besides engaging works, students will gain an enhanced set of categories and related vocabulary to understand, analyze, and interpret literary as well as other cultural works.

3) Hermeneutic Capacities: Students will improve their skills in interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating philosophical, literary, and cultural works. They will continue to develop their capacity to ask pertinent and interesting questions and, applying the value of prolepsis, to argue for and against various interpretations. They will recognize the extent to which the parts and

wholes of great works relate to one another.

4) Formal Skills: Students will advance in their articulate and precise mastery of the English language, both spoken and written, and they will improve their basic communication skills insofar as they accompany the organization and communication of their thoughts. Students will improve their capacities to formulate clear questions, listen carefully and attentively, explore ideas through dialogue, argue for and against differing positions, and express their thoughts eloquently and persuasively.

5) Intellectual Virtues: In developing their capacities for processing difficult materials, engaging in empathetic and thoughtful listening, and developing their own ideas in engagement with others, students will develop various intellectual virtues essential to a flourishing community of learning--virtues such as justice, hospitality, diplomacy, humility, courage, perseverance, patience, curiosity, and wonder.

Student Contributions to Learning and Assessment Guidelines

1) Class Contribution: 20%

Students will be expected to contribute regularly to our discussions and to adopt various informal facilitative roles during the semester. Class contribution is not equivalent with the quantity of class participation; instead both quantity and quality will be considered. Because student learning is aided by active student participation in the classroom, students will want to prepare well and contribute regularly and meaningfully to discussions.

2) Regular Assignments: 20%;

In advance of every class with the exceptions listed below, you will submit an entry, observation, analytical point, or question, to our online discussion group (via the Discussions listed under Canvas). These need not be especially long; indeed they should not exceed 275 words at the upper limit. A few sentences or a short paragraph will be fine; more words are not always better. You might respond to a study question, comment on a particular passage, address a formal or literary element, discuss an observation from another student, relate a relevant personal experience, or ask a question or set of questions that would be productive for the Canvas discussion or our eventual classroom discussion. (Asking good questions is a very important skill.) All responses must be submitted no later than Monday mornings by 10:00 and Wednesday mornings by 10:00. If you do not post by the deadline but do post before class, you must, if you wish to receive any credit, send your post not only to Canvas but also to my e-mail. It is unlikely that I will check Canvas after the deadline.

Here are the exceptions: our first two classes, Orientation and Homer I; our three sessions on *Line by Line;* our Swing Session; and any two sessions of your choosing. In the unlikely event that you forget to post for a third session (above and beyond your two free sessions of not

posting), you may make up your lost session by posting for the Swing Session.

Along with your entries to the group discussion, you may be asked to submit a small number of written assignments directly to me.

3) Three 5-Page Papers: 45%.

In addition to your informal writing, students will submit three papers, each of approximately 5 pages (papers may not exceed 7 pages without prior permission).

The first paper is to be rewritten after you receive my comments and then resubmitted within approximately one week of its return to you. (You will receive a precise deadline.) Rewriting is an excellent strategy to improve your capacity for writing.

The second paper must be rewritten only if I provide an unambiguous request to that effect on your paper. The notation could derive from some basic mistakes on which I would like you to work further, or it could originate from a missed opportunity, which I believe you should address as part of your learning experience. For other students, the rewriting is not obligatory, but simply optional. However, if you choose not to rewrite, when a request for a rewrite is given, then your grade for the paper will be dropped by one partial grade, for example, from a B to a B-. You will have one week to submit these rewrites after the papers are returned. Occasionally in the past, the first submissions of second papers have required an obligatory rewrite for all students.

The third and final paper will be graded on its one and only submission.

Here are some additional guidelines:

- Students are free to choose their topics within the context of the course and its readings. The papers should indicate both breadth and depth, for example, paying attention to the whole of an artwork but also telling the reader something intriguing and insightful. Creative topics and strategies are welcome. Students should not hesitate to think out loud with me about various options before settling on a topic. Starting early is always a wise strategy.
- All papers should be Times New Roman or a similar standard font, 12 point, and double spaced.
- Each paper should have a title and pagination, and you should list at the bottom the number of words.
- You will want to use MLA style. (MLA stands for the Modern Language Association.) This style is widespread in the humanities and relatively simple and user-friendly. The library has reference materials that spell out MLA style, such as the *MLA Handbook* or the *MLA Style Manual*, and there are short versions available on the Web. With permission, students may choose an alternative format.
- Unless we very consciously move to Canvas for assignment submissions, please submit your papers via email (to mroche@nd.edu) as a Word document. In either case, your file

name should have three elements: your name, the course number or some such designation, such as Honors, and the paper number (for example, Alice Honors Fall Paper 1 or Alice ALHN13950 Paper 1 Revised). This will make it much easier for me to organize and archive submissions.

- All paper submissions that are more than one hour late will be downgraded a partial grade. A further drop of a partial grade will occur for every 24 hours that passes beyond the due date and time.
- Technology is not an excuse for not submitting work or not submitting work on time. Please save your drafts regularly and back them up to remote devices on a regular basis.

4) Oral Examination: 15%

Each student will also have a one-on-one final oral examination of approximately twenty minutes, during which questions specific to the works discussed in class as well as related questions of broader interest will be engaged. The questions will be oriented to the works and to the learning goals above. Because each examination will be individualized (even though each examination will follow a general pattern), it should be an excellent opportunity for you to develop your ideas in conversation and for me to assess your learning. Final oral examinations will be scheduled during the examination period. Everyone seeking an examination time before the scheduled date for our final written examination (which will be replaced by oral exams) will receive one. If you need to schedule a flight home and want to know how early you can complete your exams, please let me know.

The goals of each assignment and of all evaluation are to improve understanding and performance. For more detailed comments on these assignments and on assessment guidelines, please turn to the syllabus supplement.

Essential Reading (available at the bookstore)

Required (in sequence)

Strunk, William, Jr. and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 4th ed. New York: Pearson, 1999. 978-0205309023. *An earlier version is being made available to you via Canvas, so a purchas of this text is not obligatory.*

Homer, *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 1996. 978-0-14-303995-2.

Cook, Claire Kehrwald. *Line by Line: How to Edit Your Own Writing*. New York: Houghton, 1985. 978-0395393918.

Aeschylus, *Orestia*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 1984. 978-0140443332

Sophocles, *Theban Plays*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 2000. 978-0140444254

The Gospel of John. (Students should use their own Bible; other options include the Library and the Web.)

Augustine, *Confessions*. Trans F. J. Sheed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007. 978-0872208162

Background Materials

The course will focus on primary works. Before spending too much time on secondary literature, students might consider rereading the texts in question or exploring additional works by the various authors. However, students often benefit from an introductory or contextual orientation. This is especially valuable in a context where almost all of class time is devoted to discussion as opposed to lecture. Fortunately, our works have introductions with basic background information. In those cases, for example, Hegel, where you have no introductory material, I will provide you with introductory information and analysis.

If you would like to review secondary works, there are three options: recommended reading is listed in many of our works; a library search will lead you to other works; and you should feel free to ask me for recommendations.

Canvas and Library Reserves

Some course materials will be placed on Canvas. You will use the "Discussion" function to engage in reading and posting comments before each class (with exceptions noted above). As a reminder, you will begin using the Discussions tool in advance of our second discussion of Homer.

Under Library Reserves, you will find a superb audio version of our translation by the acclaimed British actor Ian McKellen. Since Homer was originally received orally, this recording might be of considerable interest to you.

Any films we will be viewing are on library reserve. Once you click the title and accept the terms, the video will play in your web browser. In the unlikely event that you have issues with streaming videos, you can always use a computer in one of the labs on campus.

I have bought an extra copy of each DVD (or in some cases Blueray). If you wish, I can hand them out in class, so that you have as well the option of viewing them together at times you can agree upon among yourselves. Students in previous semesters who have chosen collective screenings, in some cases multiple viewing sessions with different groups of students, have found the experience and subsequent informal discussions enriching.

Calendar of Classes and Readings

Any adjustments in the calendar will not affect the due date for papers.

August 24, 2022 Orientation

In advance of our first class you will have read Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style.*

August 29, 2022 Homer, *Odyssey*, Books 1 to 6 (101 pages)

August 31, 2022 Homer, *Odyssey*, Books 7 to 12 (106 pages)

September 5, 2022 Homer, *Odyssey*, Books 13 to 18 (102 pages)

September 7, 2022 Homer, *Odyssey*, Books 19 to 24 (95 pages)

September 12, 2022 Read *Line by Line,* vii-53 (66 pages)

September 14, 2022 Aristotle, *Poetics,* and Hegel, brief excerpt on tragedy from his *Aesthetics*, 1192-1199 (51 pages)

September 19, 2022 Aeschylus, *Orestia*, *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*, until Orestes approaches the house = 99-205 (ca. 106 pages)

September 21, 2022 Aeschylus, *Orestia,* the conclusion of *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides* = 206-277 (ca. 71 pages)

September 26, 2022 Read *Line by Line,* 54-107 (63 pages)

September 28, 2022 Sophocles, *Antigone* (ca. 70 pages)

First paper due at 8:00 p.m on Thursday, September 29, 2022.

October 3, 2022 Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* (ca. 93 pages)

October 5, 2022 Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* (ca. 106 pages)

October 10, 2022 Plato, TBD

October 12, 2022 Plato, TBD

October 17, 2022 Fall Break (no class)

October 19, 2022 Fall Break (no class)

October 24, 2022 Plato, TBD

October 26, 2022 Swing Session

October 31, 2022 Read *Line by Line,* 108-138; 161-205 (74 pages)

Christianity

November 2, 2022 Gospel of John (ca. 36 pages)

Second paper due at 8:00 p.m on Friday, November 4, 2022.

November 7, 2022 Augustine, *Confessions*, Books 1-4 (ca. 60 pages)

November 9, 2022 Augustine, *Confessions*, Books 5-8 (ca. 82 pages)

November 14, 2022 Augustine, *Confessions,* Books 9-10 (ca. 64 pages)

November 16, 2022 Augustine, *Confessions,* Books 11-13 (ca. 84 pages)

November 21, 2022 Clint Eastwood, *Gran Torino* (116 minutes)

November 23, 2022 Thanksgiving Break (no class)

November 28, 2022 Dante, *Inferno*, I-XI (ca. 55 pages, not including notes)

November 30, 2022 Dante, *Inferno,* XII-XXII (ca. 55 pages, not including notes)

December 5, 2022 Dante, *Inferno*, XXIII-XXXIV (ca. 55 pages, not including notes)

December 7, 2022 Christian Artworks

The third paper is due at 8:00 p.m on the day of what would have been our final written examination, Monday December 12. (There will be no final written examination.)

Syllabus Supplement

On Canvas you will find the syllabus supplement, which includes the following sections and subsections.

Suggestions for Students
- Recommendations for a Flourishing College Experience
- Co-Leading Discussions
- Speaking in Class: Informal Tips

Grading Criteria
- Policy on Attendance and Tardiness
- Grading Scale for the University of Notre Dame
- Criteria for Grading Class Contribution

Criteria for Grading Short Written Contributions
Criteria for Grading Papers
Criteria for Grading Oral Examinations

University Policies, Guidelines, and Support Structures

Disability Accommodation
Support for Student Mental Health at Notre Dame
Student Privacy Statement
Academic Code of Honor