

**Honors Humanities Seminar
Great Works of Literature and Culture from Machiavelli to Trethewey**

Spring 2025

Mark W. Roche

ALHN 13186-08

Logistical Information

Class: Tuesdays and Thursdays from 12:30 to 1:45 in O'Shaughnessy Hall 202.

Office: 300 Decio Hall (at the very northern–Library–end of the third floor).

Advising Hours: Why? All students are encouraged to make use of advising hours, early and often. Come with course puzzles on which you would like think out loud or broader questions about how to make the most of your time at college. Advising hours are also an opportunity for me to better understand you and your aspirations, so come with a spirit of curiosity and expect generosity in return. / When? Tuesdays from 3:30 to 4:30 and Thursdays from 10:30 to 11:30 as well as by appointment. For appointments outside of advising hours, simply send me an e-mail that day or the day before or speak to me before or after class. Impromptu in-person meetings, with or without advance notice, 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. In past semesters students have preferred [appointment slots](#), so I have continued that practice.

Phone: (574) 631-8142 (office); (574) 302-1813 (cell).

E-mail: mroche@nd.edu (this is the best choice for routine contact); **Web:** <http://mroche.nd.edu/>

Course Description

In this two-semester seminar students discuss major works of literature, philosophy, art, and film. We explore ancient, medieval, and modern worlds, seeking to learn not only *about* the past but also *from* it. Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, Molière, Goethe, Hegel, Dickinson, Nietzsche, Wilde, Kafka, and Natasha Trethewey are among those examined. Guiding our discussions will be great questions such as: Why is evil so fascinating and difficult to combat? What constitutes an identity crisis? What can tragedy and comedy teach us about humanity? What are the best paths to human flourishing?

In the fall semester we encountered and discussed some of the most interesting and enduring literary figures, philosophers, theologians, and artists from the classical and medieval world. In the spring we will continue with a selection of great and fascinating works, from the early modern period to the present.

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

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

What distinguishes the modern era and what are its greatest strengths and weaknesses?
What is the legacy of the past on modernity?

What is our descriptive and normative understanding of humanity?
What triggers identity crises and how does one best deal with them?

What are the defining characteristics of comedy?
Why do we laugh?
What is the hidden purpose and theory behind the use of humor in a serious work?

What role does suffering play in our understanding of humanity?
Why is evil so fascinating to us and so difficult to combat?

How do cinematic techniques—from camera angles and chiaroscuro to editing and sound—convey suspense and drama as well as engage and advance philosophical issues?
What are some of the distinctive modes of expression in poetry?

How does modernity deal with the crisis of religious belief?
What is the role of ugliness in expanding our sense of aesthetic value?

In what ways does modernity challenge Christianity?
What roles does Christianity still play in modern art?

Is history filled with tragedy?
Is it possible to find reason in history?
Should we adapt to our own age and time or challenge it?
How do we best express love for our country?

What is the relationship of art and life?
What is at stake when one knows the truth but cannot speak of it or cannot persuade others?
What is the connection between ambiguity and aesthetic value?

Calendar of Classes and Readings

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

Transition to Modernity

January 14, 2025 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1-45 = through ch. 13 (45 pages)

January 16, 2025 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 45-80 (35 pages)

Tragedy and Comedy in Modernity

January 21, 2025 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, I.1-III.3 (63 pages)

January 23, 2025 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, III.4-V.3 (54 pages)

January 28, 2025 Molière, *The Misanthrope* (ca. 135 pages, though fewer words per page)

January 30, 2025 Molière, *Tartuffe* (ca. 150 pages, though fewer words per page)

Evil in Literature and Film

February 4, 2025 Goethe, *Faust I*, 65-257 (ca. 96 pages)

February 6, 2025 Goethe, *Faust I*, 257-421 (ca. 82 pages)

February 11, 2025 Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 5-127, through ch. 14 (ca. 122 pages)

February 13, 2025 Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 128-223 (ca. 95 pages)

First Paper due on February 13 at 11:00 p.m. Students writing one third or more of their paper on *Frankenstein* have one additional week.

February 18, 2025 Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, *The Lives of Others* (132 minutes)

February 20, 2025 Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 3-70 = ch. 5 (67 pages)

February 25, 2025 Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 71-154 (83 pages)

February 27, 2025 Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 155-213 (58 pages)

March 4, 2025 Consolidation of Learning

Modern Poetry and the Longing for Transcendence

March 6, 2025	Hölderlin, “Bread and Wine” (6 pages)
March 11, 2025	Spring Break (no class)
March 13, 2025	Spring Break (no class)
March 18, 2025	Emily Dickinson I (6 pages) 23. In the name of the Bee - 28. ‘Tis not that Dying hurts us so— 32. The morns are meeker than they were - 203. He forgot—and I—remembered— 314. “Hope” is the thing with feathers - 322. There came a Day at Summer's full, 373. This World is not Conclusion. 429. Because I could not stop for Death –
March 20, 2025	Emily Dickinson II (4 pages) 796. The Wind begun to rock the Grass 830. The Admirations — and Contempts — of time — 836. Color - Caste - Denomination - 962. A Light exists in Spring 1218. The Bone that has no Marrow, 1263. Tell all the truth but tell it slant — 1581. Those—dying then, 1668. Apparently with no surprise,

Second Paper Due on March 20 at 11:00 p.m. This deadline is only for those who have chosen to write three shorter papers. Please note that this comes shortly after break, so you may want to start your papers before break. Students writing one-third or more of their second paper on Emily Dickinson have an additional week.

March 25, 2025	Peer Learning Session
----------------	-----------------------

The Confrontation with One’s Own Death

March 27, 2025	Tolstoy, <i>The Death of Ivan Ilyich</i> (54 pages)
----------------	---

April 1, 2025	Kurosawa, <i>Ikiru</i> (143 minutes)
---------------	--------------------------------------

The Hermeneutics of Suspicion

April 3, 2025	Nietzsche, <i>Twilight of the Idols</i> , 465-505 (40 pages)
---------------	--

April 8, 2025 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 505-563 (58 pages)

April 10, 2025 Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (66 pages)

Alienation and Fragmentation

April 15, 2025 Kafka, Selected Stories

April 17, 2025 Artworks by Käthe Kollwitz, Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Pablo Picasso, among others.

Windows onto the United States of America

April 22, 2025 John Ford, *Young Mr. Lincoln* (100 minutes)

April 24, 2025 Natasha Trethewey, Selected Poems

April 29, 2025 Meeropol/Holiday, “Strange Fruit”; Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”; Barack Obama, “Remarks on the Fiftieth Anniversary of Bloody Sunday” (20 pages)

Your third paper is due on the day of what would have been our scheduled final examination day, Monday, May 5, at 11:00 p.m. If you are writing ca. one third or more of your final paper on either of our final two sessions, you may submit your paper 48 hours later than the normal deadline, so that you have time to take full advantage of our discussions.

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, and one-on-one oral examinations. 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 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 more likely 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.
- *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 clichés 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 classical 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, to listen carefully and attentively, to explore ideas through dialogue, to argue for and against differing positions, and to 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 discussion 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 almost every class, beginning with a post for one of the two sessions on Machiavelli, you will submit an entry, observation, analytical point, or question, to our online discussion group (on Canvas). Any exceptions will be clearly noted. Exceptions for now include our Swing Session and our session on Freud. In addition, students are free to miss one session before the midterm break and one session after the midterm break.

These posts 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 classroom discussion. (Asking good questions is a very important skill.) All responses must be submitted no later than Tuesday mornings by 8:00 and Thursday mornings by 8:00. 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.

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

3) Papers: 45%.

In addition to your informal writing, you will submit one paper of approximately 5 pages (at least 1,500 words). Papers may not exceed 7 pages without prior permission. After that, students have a choice: they may write two more papers of 5-7 pages, or they may write one longer paper of 10-14 pages (at least 3,000 words). The due dates for students writing three papers are February 13, March 20, and May 5. The due dates for those writing only two papers are February 13 and May 5. All papers are due by 11:00 p.m. on their respective due dates. You will submit your papers to me by e-mail (mroche@nd.edu).

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, it should be an excellent opportunity for you to develop your ideas in conversation and for me to assess your learning.

The goals of each assignment and of all evaluation are to improve learning. For assessment guidelines, please see the syllabus supplement.

Essential Reading (available at the bookstore)

Required (in sequence)

Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Hackett) 978-0872203167

Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Modern Library Classics) 978-0812969115

Molière, *Tartuffe and The Misanthrope*, trans. Richard Wilbur (Mariner) 978-0156605175

Goethe, *Faust I* (Anchor) 978-0385031141

Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Oxford Worlds Classics) 978-0198840824

Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Penguin) 978-0141439570

Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Norton) 978-0393008319

We will also have a few sessions, as we did in the fall, with pdfs, films, and images.

Secondary Literature

Undergraduate research in the humanities is primarily focused on the senior thesis. By then students have the knowledge, experience, and skills, including any relevant language skills to bring forward original insights. To help prepare humanities students for this path and to give all majors a taste of undergraduate research in the humanities, you will be required to cite at least one secondary source for one of your papers this semester. Secondary works are listed in many of our editions; a library search will bring you other works; and you should feel free to ask me for recommendations.

Canvas

Some course materials will be placed on Canvas. Please review in particular the Modules for study questions and other materials. You will use the Discussion function to engage in reading and posting comments before each class.

Library Reserves

Via Library Reserves, you will find a superb audio version of Wilde's *Dorian Gray* by Simon Vance. Because students have sometimes enjoyed listening to Homer, I added this as an option for spring. You also have access to excellent audio recordings of the Shakespeare and Molière plays.

The films we will be viewing as a class are on reserve. Once you click the title and accept the terms, the video will play in your web browser. OIT recommends that you use Google Chrome or Mozilla Firefox to ensure compatibility. In the unlikely event that you have issues with streaming videos, you can either call the Help Desk or use a computer in one of the labs on campus.

Syllabus Supplement

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

Suggestions and Resources for Students

- Recommendations for a Flourishing College Experience
- Co-Leading Discussions
- Speaking in Class: Informal Tips
- Pope Francis on the Role of Literature and Formation

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
- Generative AI, True Learning, and Academic Integrity