

Philosophy of Literature

Philosophy S3852

Summer 2015: 5/26-7/02

T/Th 5.30-8.40pm

716 Philosophy Hall

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Office Hours: Thursday 4-5pm
Course Website: <https://courseworks.columbia.edu>

This course takes up some fundamental questions in the philosophy of literature. Topics include: the definition of literature, the ontology of fiction, the question of fictional truth, the paradox of tragedy, the expression of emotion, the value of literature, and the nature of interpretation. We will consider classic and contemporary philosophical readings, as well as several literary selections. No prior coursework in philosophy is required.

Our class time will be used for lecture and discussion. Since discussion of the material is a crucial component of the class, you are expected to come to class having read the assigned essays and ready to discuss the texts. Please always be sure to bring a copy of the readings with you to class.

Course Objectives

This is an introductory survey course with several objectives:

- To help students develop their skills in reading, writing, and critically evaluating arguments.
- To provide students with an introduction to the methods and themes of philosophy of literature.
- To practice seminar techniques of active listening and respectful discussion.

Required Text

The Philosophy of Literature: Contemporary and Classic Readings - An Anthology, edited by Eileen John and Dominic McIver Lopes (Wiley-Blackwell)

This anthology has been ordered at Book Culture (536 West 112th Street). All other readings will be available as PDFs and can be found in online journals or on Courseworks (indicated in the schedule by “CW”). Please print these out and bring them with you to class.

Schedule of Topics and Readings

As the term progresses I may make some changes to this schedule. I will announce any changes in class or by email. In the first half of the course we will focus on issues raised by the nature of literary works themselves, and in the second half we will focus on issues raised by the nature of our responses to literary works. I am happy to recommend additional readings, and I am open to suggestions for other readings.

T 5/26: Introduction: Philosophy of Literature?

- No assigned reading

What is the philosophy of literature? I will provide an overview of the course topics, and we will read and discuss some selections from Aristotle's *Poetics* together with several poems from different periods.

Th 5/28: Definition of Literature

- Monroe Beardsley, "The Concept of Literature"
- E. D. Hirsch, Jr., "What Isn't Literature?"
- Literary Selection (hereafter "LS"): Arrigo Lora-Totino, "Spazio"

What is literature? Is there a definition or an account that can capture all and only the things that are literature? Or should we give up on the task of definition, because the boundaries of literature are vague and shifting?

T 6/2: Ontology of Literary Works

- Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin, "Interpretation and Identity"
- Gregory Currie, "Work and Text"
- LS: Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*"
- **Short Assignment #1 Due**

What is a literary work? Can it be identified with a sequence of words? Or is it also individuated by reference to facts about its history of production?

Th 6/4: Fictional Truth

- David Lewis, "Truth in Fiction"
- Peter Lamarque, "Logic and Criticism"
- LS: Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" (CW)

What is a fiction? What is it for something to be true in a fiction, or in a fictional world? Is it a matter of discovering what the facts are about that world, or is it inescapably a matter of interpretation?

T 6/9: Literary Interpretation: Intentionalism

- Noël Carroll, “Art, Intention, and Conversation”
- Andrew Huddleston, “The Conversation Argument for Actual Intentionalism” (CW)
- (Optional) Film: Edward Wood, *Plan 9 from Outer Space*
- **Short Assignment #2 Due**

How should we interpret literature? Must we be constrained by the intentions of actual authors? Is reading literature like having a conversation with the author?

Th 6/11: Literary Interpretation: Hypothetical- and Anti-Intentionalism

- Jerrold Levinson, “Intention and Interpretation”
- Alan Goldman, “Interpreting Novels” (CW)
- LS: Franz Kafka, “A Country Doctor” (CW)

Can we ever really know an author’s intentions? If not, is interpretation better thought of in terms of our best hypotheses about those intentions? Or should we instead aim to maximize the aesthetic value of a work?

T 6/16: Interlude: Philosophy and Literature

- Bence Nanay, “Philosophy versus Literature?” (CW)
- Robbie Kubala, “Philosophy, Literature and Emotional Engagement” (CW)
- LS: David Foster Wallace, “My Appearance” (CW)

What is the relationship between philosophy and literature? Can literature ever count as genuine philosophizing? If so, how?

Th 6/18: Emotion in Fiction

- Colin Radford, “How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?”
- Kendall Walton, “Fearing Fictionally”

How can we best explain our emotional responses to fiction? Is it incoherent to be saddened by, or fear, something that we know not to exist? Or do we not experience genuine emotions when responding to fiction?

T 6/23: The Paradox of Tragedy

- David Hume, “Of Tragedy”
- Susan Feagin, “The Pleasures of Tragedy”

If we normally go out of our way to avoid negative emotions, why do we willingly seek them out in tragic literary works? Are the negative emotions somehow converted into pleasurable ones? Or are they superseded by a positive meta-response? Or do we simply enjoy negative emotions that we can control?

Th 6/25: Literature's Cognitive Value

- Jerome Stolnitz, "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art"
- Catherine Wilson, "Literature and Knowledge"

Can literature provide knowledge? If so, what kind of knowledge? And would providing knowledge enhance the aesthetic value of a work of literature?

T 6/30: Literature's Ethical Value

- Martha Nussbaum, "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible"
- **Paper Due**

Can literature provide moral knowledge, or training in moral perception? If so, how? Could reading literature make us better people?

Th 7/2: **Final Exam**

Course Policies and Requirements

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory. If you arrive to class late or leave early you will be considered absent, unless you contact me in advance with a worthy reason. Multiple unexcused absences may result in a reduction in your final grade.

Contacting Me

If you have any questions about the course that can be answered in one or two sentences, please feel free to email your question. I will always respond within 24 hours. However, substantive questions about the content of the course or your progress must be discussed in person. I will be happy to discuss these issues in person.

Electronic Devices

In order to facilitate discussion, you may use electronic devices (e.g., laptops, tablets, phones, recording devices) only for purposes of note-taking. If you use electronic devices to distract yourself or others, your class participation grade will be lowered.

Class Preparation and Participation

You are expected to complete the assigned readings before the class for which they have been assigned and come to class prepared to discuss the text. You should always bring a copy of the text with you to class. Class email will be sent through CourseWorks, and you are responsible for any announcements or assignments sent. Please ensure that CourseWorks has your correct email address and that you have not exceeded your quota.

Disruptive behavior, disrespectful contributions, or otherwise poor participation will lower your final grade.

Short Assignments

Your two short writing assignments will help you develop the skills needed to effectively analyze arguments. You will be asked to write a one-page argument outline of one of the assigned readings. You can email these to me.

Paper

You will be responsible for one paper, five to seven pages, double-spaced. Paper topics are entirely at your discretion, although I must approve your paper topic by Thursday, June 25. You can email your paper to me.

If you do not turn in your written assignments on time, you will incur a penalty of one reduction in letter grade for each day late (e.g., from A- to B+). This penalty will begin to accrue immediately after the deadline and includes weekends.

Presentations

You will be responsible for one 15-20 minute presentation. In your presentation, you should present a summary of one of the readings and discuss at least one objection to it. You will sign up for a presentation in the second week of class.

Exam

There will be a comprehensive final exam in class. The exam will be closed-book and include short answer questions and at least one essay prompt.

Course Requirements

Two Short Assignments	10% (5% each)
Presentation	20%
Paper	25%
Final Exam	30%
Class Participation	15%

Grading Scale

I will employ a standard letter scale (no numerical grades) as follows:

- A—Excellent
- B—Good
- C—Fair
- D—Poor
- F—Unacceptable

Academic Honesty

The Columbia College honor code states: “I affirm that I will not plagiarize, use unauthorized materials, or give or receive illegitimate help on assignments, papers, and examinations. I will also uphold equity and honesty in the evaluation of my work and the work of others. I do so to sustain a community built around this Code of Honor.” Plagiarism or other forms of cheating—including using phrases copied from online sources without citation—will lead to failure of the course.