Guilty Subjects:
The problem of guilt in law, literature, and psychoanalysis

Fall 2013
IDSEM-UG 1504

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Office hours: M-W, 3:30-5:30; Tuesdays by appointment only

Course Description: Literary works from ancient tragedy to the modern novel thematize guilt in various ways. While the ancient Greeks were probably not as guilty as we might think they were, Freud borrows from them when he places guilt at the center of his practice and his theory of mind. While law seems reliant mainly upon a formal attribution of guilt in order to determine who is liable to punishment, we might also suggest it relies upon ‘guilty subjects’ for its operation. With all of these different deployments of the concept, we might agree it is a central one; yet how to define it remains a substantial question. Is the prominence of guilt in modern Western culture a vestige of a now-lost religious world? Is it, as Nietzsche suggests, an effect of “the most profound change man ever experienced...when he finally found himself enclosed within the wall of society and of peace?” Freud seems to concur when he argues that guilt must be understood as a kind of internal self-division where aggression is turned against the self. Is guilt a pointless self-punishment, meant to discipline us? Or does it continue to have an important relation to the ethical?

This seminar proposes to explore guilt as a conceptual link between the three broad disciplinary arenas of our title, with some help from philosophers and film as well. Our exploration is divided—mainly for heuristic purposes—into five rubrics, which look discrete but are in fact all overlapping and interrelated. First, we will briefly examine some ways the ancient world understood guilt. Then we'll turn our attention to what we could call "the modernist critique of guilt," focusing on the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and the novelist Franz Kafka. In Kafka's mysterious horror story of Josef K, an ordinary bureaucrat, is arrested—but what are the charges? What is he allegedly guilty of? Is he guilty of anything? How can he defend himself? We will focus on some key texts that explore the way in which psychoanalysis has developed the idea of guilt. Next, we both elaborate on and contest the psychoanalytic understanding by turning to the project and practice of “speaking guilt:" confession. Our final section synthesizes many of our concerns, turning us to trials, truth commissions, and literature.
**Required Texts:**

Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Norton


Sebald, W.G., *A Natural History of Destruction*,


All of these items are available through the NYU Bookstore. Additional materials, both required and supplemental, to be made available via NYU Classes. Please consult this site regularly.

**Learning Goals:** Through a careful examination of the various ways in which a concept is deployed in a variety of different disciplines, as well as in different historical and geographical locations, students will improve and build upon their critical and analytical skills, while developing their grasp of some a central term in the history of thought, examining in particular its fate in twentieth- and twenty-first century literature, philosophy and politics.

**Required Writing:**

You will write two papers of 8-10 pages in length and weekly brief informal response papers, in which you will develop and address questions provoked by your readings. You should bring these to class and be prepared to share them in discussion. For your longer papers, you will be given a selection of possible topics; you can also develop your own topic in consultation with me. As you go along and as you write your short response papers, keep track of the ideas, questions, texts that are of especial interest to you, that seem to connect most vividly with your own interests and your proposed concentration. Some of the best paper ideas come quite organically out of these reflections.

Short responses will generally be due on Mondays. Your response writing is simply that: it is not a quest for the most brilliant insights or the ‘right’ answer. You will find, as we go along, that there are often many ‘right’ answers to the questions we seek to pose in this course—or most frequently, that we find ourselves complicating the very notion of “right” answers.
General Requirements:

- Attendance and participation are REQUIRED. More than three unexcused absences will affect your grade negatively. More than five can cause you to fail. Absences for the observance of religious holidays are not included in this policy; please do alert me, however, if you must miss class for religious observance.

- This course is a seminar and therefore your preparedness and participation are essential.

- You must be on time; lateness not only affects your class performance but distracts everyone else.

- Just as in the movie theatre and at Carnegie Hall, please turn off your phones and electronic devices during class.

An important note on academic integrity:

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, dubbing or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.

Grading Policy: I am generally skeptical of specific percentage break-outs for assignments. I have found that in the humanities, it is difficult to make such break-outs with any mathematical accuracy. The reason for this is that assignments build on each other, develop into each other, such that if you are doing all the work for the course [preparing, doing short writing in a timely manner, participating in discussion, doing formal paper assignments with care and seriousness], each element will strengthen your overall work. Furthermore, percentage break-outs might suggest, however indirectly, that there are some assignments you can ‘skip,’ or pay less attention to, and others that should get the bulk of your attention. This course does not work that way. Nonetheless, you can think of it like this:

- Attendance is a degree zero. If you aren’t here, you can’t perform. You get no credit for being here; you lose credit if you are not.
- Preparedness, participation: 20%
- Informal Writing: 30%
- Two formal papers: 25% each
Class Schedule

Please note: this schedule may be somewhat elastic, changing with class interests and contingencies.

September 2: First class. Introductions.

Guilt: All too familiar or strangely opaque?

Part One: Guilt, Fate, Sin

September 7: Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannus

September 9: Oedipus, cont’d. Supplemental readings on Classes site.

September 14: St. Paul, ; St. Augustine, from City of God

Part Two: Modern Guilt on Trial

September 16: Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morality, 1-23

September 21: Nietzsche, cont’d, 23-45

September 23: Nietzsche, cont’d.

September 28: Kafka, The Trial, chapters 1-3, pages 1-73

September 30: Kafka, cont’d, chapters 4-6, pages 74-112

October 5: Kafka, cont’d., chapters 7-10, 113-230

Part Three: Enjoying the Superego

October 7: Freud, fr. Totem and Taboo; Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, 1-25

October 12: Fall Break

October 13: (Legislative Day: Monday Schedule)

Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, 26-75; Nolan, The Dark Knight (2008)

October 14: Freud, 76-113; Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism"

Part Four: The confessing animal

October 19: Troubling Confessions, Chapter 1, "Storytelling without Fear? The confession problem," 8-34.

Film: I confess! (Hitchcock, 1953)

October 21: Brewer v. Williams; Brooks, Chapter two, "Confessor and Confessant," 35-64.

**Midterm Paper Due**


November 2: "Central Park Five," discussion continued.

November 4: Foucault, "Wrong-doing, Truth-Telling," Coetzee, "Confession and Double Thoughts" [Classes]

**Part V: Trials, Truth Commissions, and Literature**

November 9: Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, 9-51; Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 1-83


- Documentary: "The Eichmann Trial," PBS
- Supplemental Readings on Classes site

November 23: Sebald, "Air War and Literature," *Natural History of Destruction*

November 25-27: Thanksgiving Break

December 2: Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 1-106

Minow, "Truth Commissions;"

December 7: Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 107-213

December 9: Coetzee, cont’d.; Sanders, "Literature and Testimony"

December 14: Last Class: Summing up, discussion of final papers, etc.

December 17: final papers due