Literature and the Idea of Justice

First-Year Research Seminar/Spring 2016

FIRST UG 717001

Monday/Wednesday 11-12:15
Description: A blindfolded woman holding scales aloft and wielding a sword: this is the classic representation of Justitia. Justice, this image suggests, entails a balancing of the scales; it is 'blind' or objective; and it entails violence, or the threat of it. But can we presume such a balance and blindness? And is violence necessary to justice? It turns out that justice itself is very difficult to define, shifting its meanings over time, between cultures and among individuals. In this course, we'll have an opportunity to explore some ideas about justice—and injustice. Is what gets called 'justice' merely the 'right of the strong'? How are law and justice connected? Is justice simply an unrealizable ideal? While these seem to be questions for political philosophers and jurists, they are also often addressed by literary writers. In this course, our focus will be on how literary texts take up these problems at different junctures primarily in the Western tradition—and how literary works' explorations of these ideas differ from or draw from politics, law and philosophy.

Objectives and Learning Goals: Our goals in this course will be multiple. The principal goal is to refine and develop your strengths in the general conventions of academic essay writing. In order to increase your command and awareness of the writing process, you will work on building an argument, referring to other texts, using secondary material effectively, and mastering the mechanics of quoting, citing, and documenting sources. Students will come to understand some of the different ways justice has been understood and written about by different writers in different genres. Thus another of our major objectives is to use writing to engage in reflection on the interdisciplinary with regard to our course topic. How do different disciplines think about the same topic? What might they borrow from each other? When do they seem to exclude each other—and with what effects?

Required Texts:


**Required Writing:** This is a course that is fundamentally about writing, so you will be doing quite a bit of it. You'll write two analytical essays (5 pages), one sustained research essay (10 pages) and one reflective essay (3-5 pages). You will have frequent short, informal writing assignments as well; these may take the form of blog entries. Note also that electronic submission of all final essays is permitted, in fact, encouraged; however, only Word attachments are accepted.

**Required Short Presentation:** You will also present five minute discussion of your research paper at the end of the semester.

**General Rulebook:** Especially because this course is a seminar and relies a good deal on your oral and written participation, attendance is of utmost importance. *More than three unexcused absences endanger your grade.*

*Lateness is immensely discouraged*; be here on time and be prepared. Late papers are likewise looked upon with great sorrow and will damage your grade. Have your work done on the day it is due. Review the Gallatin Policy on Incompletes; they are only offered in extreme cases and only if the student requests an incomplete well prior to the final week of the semester.

*Plagiarism is defined as the knowing attempt to pass off another writer’s work as your own.* It is the most severe of offenses in the University community; if you are discovered plagiarizing, you will be penalized severely. 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, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin website for a full description of the academic integrity policy: [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html].

However, confusion can arise about citing sources properly; working on this is part of our class work so please ask me when you have questions about this.

In general, you should feel very welcome in asking questions and seeking help, in class and in office hours or via email. I also encourage you to use the Gallatin Writing Center to receive peer feedback on your writing and opportunities to brainstorm and discuss your work in an informal setting.
Class Schedule


Part One: Justice in the Ancient Polis


February 1: Agamemnon, 16-49.

• Short informal writing


• Supplemental: Allen, "Revenge vs. Punishment: Rereading the Oresteia" [on your classes site]

• Short informal writing 2.


February 15: Presidents’ Day. No class.

February 17: Discussion cont’d.

• Informal Idea Writing for First Paper


• Sign up for Office Hours Appointments

Part Two: "In the course of justice, none of us should see salvation"


March 2: MoV, Act III, 36-54.

March 7: MoV, Acts IV and V, 54-75.

March 9: MoV, continued.

• Supplemental Readings: Newman, O'Rourke, Hall, in Norton.

• Final Version of Paper One due.
March 13-19: spring break


- Informal Writing

March 23: Melville, *Billy Budd.*


March 30: Melville, *Billy Budd.*


April 11: Workshop: Research Topics, Research Questions

Reading: Booth, on Classes Site.

- Final Version of Essay Two due.

Part Three: The Ghosts of Injustice


- Supplemental: Sklar, "The Sense of Injustice" [on classes site]
- Ellison, "Society, Morality, and the Novel" [classes]
- Research Question Writing Due


- Annotated Bibliography for Research Paper Due

April 20: Baldwin, Cont’d.

- Ta-Nehisi Coates. "The Case for Reparations" [classes]

April 25: Workshop Day: Full Draft of Research Paper

April 27: TBA.

May 2: Presentation Day: Five Minute Presentation on your research paper

May 4: Presentation Day 2

May 9: Presentation Day 3

- Last Class: All research papers due.
May 11: Final Reflective Essay due.