The Ancient Quarrel in Our Time:
Fiction and Philosophy Since World War II
KHC EN 102

In Book 10 of *The Republic* (360 BCE), Socrates observes that “there is an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy.” Plato’s dictum is blunt, but we do often have a strong sense that the work of artists and the work of thinkers are somehow fundamentally different. Poets and writers, we sometimes think, are essentially creative, imaginative, and even slightly irrational people, and work by inspiration to create beauty and stir emotion. Philosophers, by contrast, are on a hard-nosed quest for truth; they look at the facts, construct careful arguments, and reflect rationally on ourselves and the world. Being a great artist seems to come at the cost of being a great thinker, and vice versa.

In this course, we will consider the “ancient quarrel” as it was debated by Plato and his student Aristotle, before moving on to several authors who since World War II have updated the quarrel in our own time. In Part II of the course, we will survey texts—novels and philosophical works—usually associated with existentialism, a movement that developed in the first half of the twentieth century and whose exemplary voices were uncommonly sensitive to the relationship between literature and philosophy. In Part III, we will look at later novelists and theorists who take the “ancient quarrel” in different directions, often self-consciously challenging the existentialist emphasis on the willful, isolated, creative self. In Part IV, we will glance briefly at some recent commentators who address the status of the ancient quarrel.

In the course of our readings and discussions, we will be examining not only the longstanding divide in our intellectual culture between art and argument, “creative” and “analytic” modes of thought. We will also be exploring major literary texts by a diverse range of writers: ancient Greece tragedians, Parisian intellectuals, Anglo-Irish moral philosophers, white Americans from the Midwest, African-American cosmopolitans, New York postmodernists, South African Nobel Laureates. Last, we will also be investigating essential philosophical questions that have been debated from Plato to the present: What is a good person? What is my relationship to other people? How can I even know another person? What is responsible action? What is my relationship to the natural world, including animals? Does my life have order, coherence, and meaning? Do I believe in God, and if so, how? How have my political community and my culture’s history shaped me? What is the good of art? What are its dangers? Can art think?

Assignments and Grade Breakdown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paper 1 (on Part I)</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper 2 (on Part II)</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper 3 (on Part III)</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quizzes</td>
<td>10%</td>
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</table>
Participation 10%

Books to Buy or Borrow

*Classical Literary Criticism, editor Penelope Murray (Penguin)
*Sophocles, Ajax
*Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea
*Iris Murdoch, Under the Net
*Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man
*Marilynne Robinson, Gilead
*J. M. Coetzee, The Lives of Animals

Some Notes on Policies and Assignments

Attendance: To get anything out of this course, you will need to be here regularly. You may miss only two classes meeting without penalty. Partial absences will be tallied, so (for instance) missing half a class on two separate days will be the equivalent of missing a whole day. I will not be distinguishing between “excused” and “unexcused” absences, so please save your absences for when they are most unavoidable. If you exceed the allotted absences, your course grade may be lowered by a partial grade for every extra day missed (e.g., a B becomes a B- with two absences, a B- becomes a C+, etc.).

Punctuality: Late arrivals and early departures are disturbing to me and your fellow students, so please be on time and don’t leave early without giving me a good reason ahead of time.

Technology: Computers cannot be used during class, nor can other portable devices such as cell phones, iPads, etc. On those rare occasions that the readings are posted on the Blackboard site, you must print them out and bring them to class. Attention to class discussion requires living offline for a little while.

Participation: Bring questions, comments, your book, and your marginalia to class. Be prepared to read passages aloud, answer questions that are asked to you out of the blue, and discuss the day’s reading in small groups with other students. Quality of comments counts at least as much as quality. While in class, I ask that you show respect for all members of the class and observe some routine courtesies: listen when people are speaking; raise your hand when you want to make a point; turn off your cell phones; don’t eat during class; don’t talk with your neighbor while others are speaking.

Quizzes: This is a reading-heavy course, and the unannounced reading exams are designed to encourage you to make it through the fiction on the syllabus. Each one will take place at the start of the day indicated, and will consist of 10-12 multiple-choice and short-answer questions asking about the names of characters, basic plot elements, settings, etc. Each single quiz makes a negligible contribution to your final grade, but cumulatively they will reflect the intensity of your reading during the course. Make-up exams and re-takes are not available, but your lowest quiz grade will be dropped in the final calculations. So if you miss one, don’t panic.

Presentation: Once in the semester, you will give a 7-10-minute presentation to the class. A signup sheet will be passed around in the first week, and specific instructions will be coming.

Papers: The three papers are the most important part of your final grade. One paper will be written for each of the three main sections of the course (sections I-III), and due dates for them are clearly marked on the schedule below. Paper 1 will be approximately 2000 words; papers two and three will each be approximately 3000 words. For each paper, I will be distributing some questions well ahead of time for you to consider.
Schedule of Readings and Class Discussions

*Items marked with an asterisk can be found on the course Blackboard site under "Content"*

I. What Quarrel?

1 9/5 Introduction
9/7 Sophocles, Ajax
9/12 Plato, The Republic, Books II, III
9/14 Plato, The Republic, Book IX, X
9/19 Aristotle, Poetics
9/21 Aristotle, Poetics
9/22 Paper 1 due

II. Existentialist Themes

9/26 Soren Kierkegaard, from Either/Or and The Present Age*
9/28 Martin Heidegger, from Being and Time (on “Das Man”)*
10/3 Jean-Paul Sartre, from Being and Nothingness (on “bad faith”)*
10/5 Sartre, Nausea
10/10 no class--holiday
10/12 Sartre, Nausea
10/19 Simone de Beauvoir, from The Ethics of Ambiguity*
10/21 Iris Murdoch, Under the Net
10/24 Murdoch, Under the Net
10/26 Richard Wright, “The Man Who Lived Underground”*
10/31 Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man
11/2 Ellison, Invisible Man
11/7 Ellison, Invisible Man
11/9 Ellison, Invisible Man
11/10 Paper 2 due
III. After Existentialism?

11/14  Donald Barthelme, “A Shower of Gold”*
       Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation”*
11/16  Marilynne Robinson, Gilead
11/21  Robinson, Gilead
11/23  Thanksgiving—no class
11/28  Coetzee, The Lives of Animals
11/30  Peter Singer, from Animal Liberation*
       Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy”*

IV. Recent Thoughts on the Quarrel

12/5   Richard Rorty, “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens”*
12/7   Martha Nussbaum, “The Literary Imagination”*
       Robert Pippin, “‘The Force of Felt Necessity’: Literature, Ethical Knowledge, and Law”*
12/12  Paper 3 due in class