**First Year Seminar**

**Mortal and Immortal Questions**

Tisch Hall, Room LC13 (Mon/Wed 2-3:15pm)

Instructor: Phillip Mitsis

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Office hours: By appointment

Course Description

We will be reading a wide-ranging selection of works from different cultures and chronological periods that have framed in memorable, though often contradictory, ways some basic questions about what it means to be a human being faced with death.  How, for example, should my death affect the way I live, and what kinds of attitudes should I hold toward it? Should I just ignore it? Or if it is an evil and to be feared, how is it evil, and when does my death harm me? We will also consider the view that death is not the end of our lives. Could we in some sense be immortal and would that be desirable? More generally, what exactly does it mean to say that someone has died and how significant to me is the continuing existence of others after my death?

Learning Objectives

Students who successfully complete this course will be able to:

--Analyze and criticize literary and philosophical works by learning to pay careful attention to their rhetorical and poetic methods, arguments, and goals.

--Learn to write clear and coherent exegesis of individual passages and arguments in a variety of genres.

--Explain central themes and concepts about death that emerge from works of significantly different time periods and cultures.

--Demonstrate an ability to argue and defend particular interpretations based on textual evidence and critical methods of argument.

--Practice questioning and evaluating the ideas that arise in these works from a variety of critical perspectives.

--Make synthetic, comparative judgments about the nature of literary influence.

GRADING AND COURSE POLICIES

As much as this is a course about the works of great writers and thinkers, it is also a course about students’ skills. Its aim is to improve skills in interpretation, analysis, discussion, and writing. The assignments, classes, exams, and writing assignments are all designed to help students gain a higher level of proficiency in the key skills necessary for a college career and (far longer) the life of the mind.

There will be three writing assignments and one final exam.

Grades will be determined as follows:

Paper 1 (5 pages) 15%

Paper 2 (5 pages) 15%

Paper 3 (10 pages) 30%

Final Exam 30%

Class Participation 10%

Detailed guidelines will be given for each of the papers. Assignments will build from an initial short paper of exegesis to one that isolates a particular discourse, to a final paper that discusses an intertextual discourse. (See detailed descriptions below). Topics will be distributed well in advance of the due dates (these dates are listed below with the weekly reading assignments).  I will be happy to read and discuss drafts in advance.  Students who receive a grade below a B on either of the first papers may do a rewrite.  The final grade for a paper will be the average of the grade on the original and the grade on the revision.  Students will receive a grade toward the middle of the semester.  This is entirely informal; its purpose is to let you know how you are doing.

Note:  I will not discuss changing grades on assignments during the semester.  If you get a grade that is lower than you hoped, you need to figure out how to improve your performance, and I will always be happy to discuss with you how you can do so. Class attendance is obligatory.  If you have more than three unexcused absences in the semester, it will negatively affect your grade.  If you need to miss class for religious reasons, let me know early in the semester; if you miss class because of a medical or family emergency, email me as soon as possible. If you miss four consecutive classes, it will be reported to the Dean of Students’ office.  Generally, any student who misses more than six classes cannot pass the course.

Exams must be taken with the class (unless religious beliefs or a medical emergency make this impossible); NYUAD policy does not allow me to reschedule or give an exam early to any individual because of holiday flight plans.  Late papers will be graded down.

Students with disabilities will be accommodated in accordance with the University guidelines and I will do my best to make any informal accommodations that are necessary.

WARNING:  the MINIMUM penalty for a plagiarized paper is a grade of “F” for the paper.  Each student is responsible for understanding what plagiarism is; if you have any questions about this you should speak to me BEFORE submitting your work.

Finally, TURN OFF YOUR CELL PHONE during class.  Anyone whose phone rings (or beeps, etc.) or who checks his/her phone during class will likely be subjected to an annoying lecture about how much better students and classes were in my day because we only had books and pay phones. No open laptops are allowed. You may take notes by hand.

Description of the three writing assignments:

Paper 1

Choose a passage from either Sophocles or Euripides (somewhere around half a page).  Using textual evidence, examine the ways in which the passage establishes its own logic and performs its own meaning.  What does it ask readers to consider?  How does it teach the reader to read and understand it?  Think about the way that narrators or characters present their ideas and arguments (the passage's rhetoric and style), as well as the content of the language itself.

Your task is to write an exegesis--a comprehensive explanation of the details in the passage--that expresses a clear argument about the way the passage works. 5-7 pp.

Paper 2

Please choose one passage from a text we have read that strikes or provokes you, that arrests you in your reading.  Think about how the passage reflects a*discourse* in the text as a whole--a concern or problem about which the text presents a*conversation*--the way that (for example) Alcestis’ speech on death reflects the play's discourse about death, its conversation about the meaning of her death.  Each text presents many discourses--the play *Alcestis* presents not only a discourse of death, but also a discourse of heroism, of love, etc.  Your passage will not only point us toward a particular discourse related to death; it will also suggest what might be the text's argument *within* that discourse.  That is, *Alcestis* is not only *discussing* death; it is also *saying something about it.*It might also be saying more than one thing about it--in which case your project is to make sense out of the various things the text is saying about it.

Write a paper that exposes the role of your chosen passage in one (major) discourse of the text as a whole.  How does your passage point to a particular discourse in the text?  What does that discourse sound like--what are its examples and arguments, both in and outside of the passage?  Then reveal for us what your text might be *arguing* within that discourse, and how the *details* of your passage might point us toward that argument.  5-7 pp.

Final paper.

For your final paper (2500 words), I would like you to move beyond the boundaries of a single work and extend your analysis to two texts that are in conversation.

In your readings, you have seen how authors continually look to other texts and offer a reading of them in order to foster their own arguments.  The project of this final writing assignment is for you to engage in a *dialogue* with an author interpreting another text—that is, (1) to represent and explain the author's use of the earlier text, and (2) to speak back to the author: using both his text and the earlier text as evidence, evaluate the author's claims and, in the process, develop your own idea to add to the conversation.

This project is not simply about comparing ideas that you find in these different works, or isolating a similar kind of discourse in both—you are being asked to find a point of view, to make an argument.  But be careful not to simply agree or disagree with the author's claims: rather, construct a more nuanced idea.  (Turn your "yes" into a "yes, if…" and your "no" into a "no, but…")  Always justify your claims with careful reading of the texts: what they argue, *how* they argue, how they define their terms, etc.

Your prompt will suggest three moments in your readings for you to choose from that I think offer a fruitful opportunity for developing this kind of dialogue.  You may also suggest one of your own, but it needs to be approved by me in advance.

**Writing Tutors Program**

This course is lucky to be supported by the Undergraduate Writing Tutors Program. Writing tutors are curious, well-trained peers who provide feedback to you on drafts of writing assignments. Their role is to encourage and challenge you to strengthen your writing and clarify your ideas. While writing tutors will not assess papers, they will focus written comments and individual writing conferences on questions that generate clearer writing and stronger thinking about the content. Students are required to participate in the program for each designated paper assignment, submitting a draft of their paper on time for written feedback and attending a scheduled, 30-minute long, one-on-one conference.

Our main contact in the program is Laura Weinert-Kendt, who is a writer and Clinical Associate Professor at NYU. Her articles and reviews have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *LA Weekly*, *Newsday*, and *Back Stage West*. Her fiction has appeared in *Witness* and *The Mechanics' Institute Review*. At NYU, she created the course Writing in Community, which pairs college writing mentors with NYC high school students. She also serves as a Writing in the Disciplines consultant. In 2012, she received NYU’s Golden Dozen Teaching Award.

The two student writing tutors are Kailyn Williams ([kcw9128@nyu.edu](mailto:kcw9128@nyu.edu" \t "_blank)) and Rina Tang ([kt2504@nyu.edu](mailto:kt2504@nyu.edu" \t "_blank)). Professor Weinert-Kendt and the two writing peers will be visiting class sometime during the first few weeks to acquaint people with the program and to answer any questions.

Readings

Cather, "Neighbor Rosicky"

Chopin, "The Story of an Hour"

Euripides, *Alcestis*, *Medea*

Fuller, "The Case of the Speluncean Explorers"

Glaspell, *Trifles*

Hemmingway, "Hills Like White Elephants"

Kafka, "A Country Doctor"

Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*

Mouawad, "Scorched"

Nagel, "Death"

Saki, "Laura"

Sartre, "No Exit"

Silko, "The Man to Send Rainclouds"

Sophocles, *Oedipus*

Tolstoy, "The Death of Ivan Ilych"

Williams, "The Makropulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality"

**Approximate schedule of weekly readings**

Prepare the assigned readings for class and BRING ALL READINGS TO CLASS.

Sept. 6 Introduction

Sept. 11 Sophocles, *Oedipus*

Sept. 13. Sophocles, *Oedipus*

Sept. 18 Euripides, *Alcestis*

Sept. 20 Euripides, *Alcestis*

Sept. 25 Euripides, *Medea*

Sep. 27. Euripides, *Medea*

October 2 Euripides, *Medea*

**First paper due**

October 4 Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*

October 9 No Class

October 11 Lucretius, Book 3 830- to end of bk. 3.

October 16 Nagel

October 18 Bernard Williams

October 23 Glaspell, *Trifles* Debates

(Owen Pell esq. from White & Case will judge and speak)

October 25 Glaspell, *Trifles.* Debates

October 30 Paper discussion

November 1 Paper Discussion

November 6 (Drafts due to Writing Tutors)

November 8 Paper Discussion

November 12 Seongbukdong Beedoolkee, "Medea on Media"

November 13. Kafka, *The Country Doctor*

November 15 Sartre, *No Exit*

November 20 Cather, *Neighbor Rosicky*

Guest Lecture, Cassandra Csencsitz

**Second Paper due**

November 27 Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour"

November 29 Silko, "The Man to Send Rainclouds"

December 4 Saki, "Laura"

December 6 Hemmingway, "Hills Like White Elephants"

(Drafts due to Writing Tutors)

December 11 Fuller, "The Case of the Speluncean Explorers"

December 13 Conclusions

**Final Paper Due**

December 18-22 Final Exam Period