

PHIL 253-001: Philosophy and Literature (Spring 2023)

10:30 AM to 11:45 AM MW Krug Hall 19

Instructor: Dr. James Gledhill
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Office hours: M 11:45 AM to 12:45 AM
At other times via Zoom (<https://gmu.zoom.us/j/3527370996>)
All meetings by appointment

Resources and information on Blackboard

All course information, including the syllabus, assignments, and any additional announcements or changes to the schedule will be posted on the Blackboard page for this course. Copies of announcements will be sent via email; be sure to check your GMU email regularly for class announcements. All the articles and book chapters listed in the required reading for this course will be made available on the Blackboard page as pdfs.

Required purchases

You will need to purchase two novels by J.M. Coetzee: *Disgrace*, which we will begin discussing in class on Feb 13, and *Elizabeth Costello*, which we will begin discussing on Apr 3. Please ensure that, if possible, you have the editions below so that the page numbering is the same for everyone.

Coetzee, J.M. (2000). *Disgrace*. New York: Penguin Books.

Coetzee, J.M. (2004). *Elizabeth Costello*. New York: Penguin Books.

Description of the course

This course focuses on the relationship between ethics and literature. Should we read literature with an eye to how it grapples with ethical questions and to the moral lessons it has to teach us, or does this impede the appreciation of art for its own sake? If reading does have an ethical dimension, can the experience of reading some works of literature, particularly modern novels, make us better citizens and better people? With literary reading on the decline, are we in danger of losing a source of meaning and moral insight that is of fundamental cultural significance? From a philosophical perspective, could it be that literature is an important supplement to moral philosophy in exploring ethical questions? More radically still, should literature be seen as a form of moral philosophy, indeed a form of moral philosophy that is better able to portray the texture of our moral lives and the complexity of ethical deliberation? These are the questions we

will be exploring in the first half of the course. In the second half, we will apply the insights gained to reading a critically acclaimed, widely debated, and philosophically rich modern novel, J.M. Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace*, set in post-apartheid South Africa. As well as exploring the novel's themes of race, gender, and gender violence within their historical and political context, we will also consider how the novel might be held to portray and inspire a process of ethical imagination.

The classes for this course are intended to provide a space to explore and discuss ideas and arguments in an open, respectful, constructive, and collaborative environment. As an instructor, I aim to provide you with the frameworks you need to understand and engage with the texts we will be reading, facilitate substantive and productive discussion, and respond to questions that arise.

Course goals and objectives

This course aims to equip you with philosophical frameworks for thinking about the relationship between ethics and literature and to give you the opportunity to explore these ideas through a close and collaborative reading of a novel while developing skills in analyzing and criticizing philosophical and literary texts and in articulating your views clearly and logically in oral and written form.

The course focuses on the following three Mason Core learning outcomes:

- Students will be able to read for comprehension, detail, and nuance
- Identify and evaluate the contribution of the social, political, historical, and cultural contexts in which a literary text is produced
- Evaluate a critical argument in others' writing as well as one's own

Grading and course requirements

Basic breakdown:

1. Participation: 10%
2. Two worksheets: 15% each, due Feb 15 and Mar 29
3. One group presentation on part of Coetzee's *Disgrace*: 10%, in class from Feb 15 to Mar 1
4. Two essays: 25% each, due Mar 15 and May 10

Detailed information:

1. Participation

- Blackboard discussion board posts. In the first instance, your participation grade is determined by your contributions to discussion boards on Blackboard. Beginning in the second week, I will set up a discussion board at the beginning of each week (except for the weeks when we are reading *Disgrace*) with a question related to the week's reading. On each of these weeks you will be expected to post one personal contribution to the discussion forum by 9 AM on Wednesday. Your discussion board post should be one

paragraph in length (around 4-5 sentences). I will post an example in the first discussion board. You are encouraged to respond to post constructive responses to other students' posts and to start other discussion board threads to raise questions of clarification or other issues for discussion.

- Class contributions. You can increase your participation grade by one sub-grade (4%) through consistent, thoughtful, relevant, and constructive contributions to class discussions.
- Attendance. You are permitted two unexcused absences without penalty, but for any further unexcused absences, your participation grade will be reduced by 2% for each class missed. If you will be absent for a good reason, please email the Graduate Assistants.

2. Worksheets

Two worksheets will be assigned, one on the ethical criticism debate and one on literature and/as moral philosophy. These worksheets will consist of around five short answer questions to be completed outside class. The purpose of the worksheets is to encourage you to engage in a close reading of the texts and to assess your understanding of concepts and arguments.

3. Group presentation

You will be required to contribute to a group presentation on Coetzee's *Disgrace*. A grade will be awarded to the group as a whole. Arrangements for the group presentation will be confirmed when it is clear how many students are taking the course and full guidelines about what should be included in the presentation will be provided.

4. Essays

Two essays will be assigned. Essays should be 1,500 - 2,000 words in length and should develop a response to one of the assigned questions/prompts. The purpose of the essays is to assess your ability to engage critically with the philosophical and literary texts we will be reading, developing your own lines of analysis and argument.

Student participation and assignments

Attending classes is an important learning opportunity and a requirement for passing the course. If you miss more than four classes without a good reason then you jeopardize your ability to pass the course.

All written assignments must be submitted on the Blackboard page for this course by the relevant deadline. There will be a clearly marked section on Blackboard for each assignment.

I am committed to showing a reasonable degree of flexibility when it comes to attendance and submission of assignments. Please get in touch with me as soon as possible and we can discuss any reasonable accommodations and make a plan for moving forward.

In recognition of the fact that unexpected issues can arise for all of us, for one (and only one) assignment you can use a “**life happens pass**” to submit the assignment up to 48 hours late with no questions asked.

In other cases, extensions can be arranged in exceptional circumstances if you have a good reason for submitting work late, but please email me in advance to request an extension. Extensions cannot be given beyond the last day of the exam period.

Questions and problems

If you have a question about the course, or a problem with a class or an assignment, please do one or more of the following:

- Ask me in class (often others will have the same question/concern, so this will help everyone)
- Email me (jgledhil@gmu.edu) with a question or query. I will respond to emails as soon as I reasonably can, but you should not count on getting a reply late in the evening or at weekends, so plan ahead and don't leave questions about assignments or reading until the last minute!
- Email me (jgledhil@gmu.edu) to make an appointment to see me in my in-person office hours or via Zoom at another time

Required readings

All the articles and book chapters listed in the required reading for this course will be made available on the Blackboard page as pdfs. I strongly encourage you to print off the readings, as it is far easier to annotate and refer to paper copies of scholarly texts. If you choose to work with the texts electronically, find out how to mark-up pdf files (e.g., by using Adobe Reader). Regardless of the format you end up using, it is essential that you bring the assigned reading to each class and that you have it in front of you, as I will be referring to the readings regularly in class. To avoid copyright issues, please note that you remain subject to all the rights and restrictions of the publishers, and you are expected to honor those. Your copies of all the works I provide are to be used solely for the purposes of this class; they are not to be distributed, sold, or employed for any other purpose. Your participation in this class indicates your agreement to be bound by these limitations.

The schedule of readings is given below. I will expect you to have done the set reading before the relevant class and I will let you know which parts of the reading we will be focusing on in each class. This means reading through the set text or texts at least once; going back and re-reading either the whole text, or the passages that seem especially important / difficult / puzzling / interesting to you; highlighting, annotating, and making notes on the key concepts and arguments in the texts; and writing down your thoughts and questions on the text. We will be

reading complex philosophical and literary texts that are hard to grasp on a first reading and inevitably raise many questions. In class we will be looking closely at important and difficult parts of the texts and discussing questions arising from your reading.

Name and pronoun use

If you wish, please share your name and gender pronouns with me and indicate how best to address you in class and via email. I use he/him/his for myself and you may address me as “James” or “Dr. Gledhill” in email and verbally.

Student use of electronic devices

Cell phones and other communicative devices are not to be used during class. Please keep them stowed away and out of sight. Laptops or tablets may be used for referring to readings and taking notes. Use for any other purpose may significantly affect your participation grade.

Safe return to campus webpage

Refer to the Safe Return to Campus webpage (<https://www2.gmu.edu/safe-return-campus>) to keep track of any updates or changes to university-wide Covid-19 policies. If you suspect that you are sick, please stay home and contact me about options for making up the missed class.

Academic integrity, including plagiarism

Mason has an Honor Code with clear guidelines regarding academic integrity. You should always follow these three principles: (1) all work submitted must be your own and no part of it should have been previously submitted for another course; (2) when using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, you should give full credit through accurate citations; and (3) if you are uncertain about the ground rules on a particular assignment, ask for clarification.

Plagiarism means using the exact words, opinions, or facts from another person without giving the person credit. Writers give credit through accepted documentation styles, such as parenthetical citation, footnotes, or endnotes. Paraphrased material must also be cited. A simple listing of books or articles is not sufficient. If you are in any doubt about what constitutes plagiarism, please contact me before you submit your work. For acceptable citation models, see Purdue University Online Writing Lab (Purdue OWL), “Research and Citation”:
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/>.

Disability accommodations

Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students by upholding the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. If you are seeking accommodations for this class, please first visit <http://ds.gmu.edu/> for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Then please discuss your approved accommodations with me. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: ods@gmu.edu | Phone: (703) 993-2474.

Commitment to diversity

In keeping with the general ethos of the University, this class seeks to create a learning environment that fosters respect for people across differences. We welcome and value individuals and their differences, including gender expression and identity, race, economic status, sex, sexuality, ethnicity, national origin, first language, religion, age, and ability. We encourage all members of the learning environment to engage with the material personally, but to also be open to exploring and learning from experiences different than their own.

This does not mean not being critical: respecting others' views means taking them seriously, and taking them seriously means thinking about their strengths and weaknesses, asking questions, and offering constructive criticisms or alternative viewpoints where appropriate. It also means thinking about where the views of others challenge our own and being open to what they have to teach us.

Sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, and interpersonal violence

George Mason University is committed to providing a learning, living, and working environment that is free from discrimination and a campus that is free of sexual misconduct and other acts of interpersonal violence in order to promote community well-being and student success. We encourage students and employees who believe that they have been sexually harassed, sexually assaulted or subjected to sexual or interpersonal misconduct to seek assistance and support. University Policy 1202: Sexual Harassment and Misconduct speaks to the specifics of Mason's process, the resources, and the options available to students and employees.

As a faculty member, I am designated as a "Non-Confidential Employee," and must report all disclosures of sexual assault, sexual harassment, interpersonal violence, stalking, sexual exploitation, complicity, and retaliation to Mason's Title IX Coordinator per University Policy 1202. If you wish to speak with someone confidentially, please contact one of Mason's confidential resources, such as Student Support and Advocacy Center (SSAC) at 703-993-3686 or Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at 703-993-2380. You may also seek assistance or support measures from Mason's Title IX Coordinator by calling 703-993-8730, or emailing titleix@gmu.edu.

Privacy

Students must use their Mason email account to receive important University information, including communications related to this class. I will not respond to messages sent from or send messages to a non-Mason email address.

Course schedule

N.B. The reading schedule is subject to change. See the course Blackboard page for announcements and the most up to date reading schedule.

1. Why read literature?

- M. Jan 23 **Introduction: (Why) do you read literature?**
Ingraham, Christopher (2016). The Long, Steady Decline of Literary Reading. *The Washington Post*. September 7.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/09/07/the-long-steady-decline-of-literary-reading/?utm_term=.152407e3dfff
- Denby, David (2016). Do Teens Read Seriously Any More? *The New Yorker*. February 23. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/books-smell-like-old-people-the-decline-of-teen-reading>
- W. Jan 25 **The need to read?**
Currie, Gregory (2013). Does Great Literature Make Us Better? *The New York Times*. June 1. <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/01/does-great-literature-make-us-better/>
- Murphy Paul, Annie (2013). Reading Literature Makes Us Smarter and Nicer. *Time*. June 3. <http://ideas.time.com/2013/06/03/why-we-should-read-literature/>
- Swallow Prior, Karen (2013). How Reading Makes Us More Human. *The Atlantic*. June 21. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/06/how-reading-makes-us-more-human/277079/>
- Schwalbe, Will (2016). The Need to Read. *Wall Street Journal*. 25 November. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-need-to-read-1480083086>

2. The ethical criticism debate: Can reading make us morally batter?

- M. Jan 30 **The narrative imagination and democratic citizenship**
Nussbaum, Martha (2008). Democratic Citizenship and the Narrative Imagination. *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* 107(1): 143-157.
- W. Feb 1 **The narrative imagination in public life**
Nussbaum, Martha (1991). The Literary Imagination in Public Life. *New Literary History* 22 (4):877-910, pp. 877-888.
- M. Feb 6 **Posner's critique of ethical criticism**
Posner, Richard A. (1997). Against Ethical Criticism. *Philosophy and Literature* 21 (1):1-27.
- W. Feb 8 **Nussbaum's defense of ethical criticism**
Nussbaum, Martha (1998). Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism. *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (2):343-365.
Ethical criticism worksheet assigned

3. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the possibility of ethical imagination

- M. Feb 13 **Coetzee's *Disgrace* I**
Coetzee, J.M. (2000). *Disgrace*. New York: Penguin Books, chaps. 1-4, pp. 1-33.

- W. Feb 15 **Coetzee's *Disgrace* II**
Disgrace, chaps. 5-7, pp. 34-65.
Ethical criticism worksheet due
- M. Feb 20 **Coetzee's *Disgrace* III**
Disgrace, chaps. 8-11, pp. 66-97.
- W. Feb 22 **Coetzee's *Disgrace* IV**
Disgrace, chaps. 12-15, pp. 98-132.
- M. Feb 27 **Coetzee's *Disgrace* V**
Disgrace, chaps. 16-19, pp. 133-170.
- W. Mar 1 **Coetzee's *Disgrace* VI**
Disgrace, chaps. 20-24, pp. 171-215.
- M. Mar 6 ***Disgrace* and ethical imagination I**
Crary, Alice (2010). J. M. Coetzee, Moral Thinker, in Anton Leist and Peter Singer (eds.)
J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature. New York:
Columbia University Press, pp. 249-268.
Hämäläinen, Nora (2013). The Personal Pilgrimage of David Lurie – Or Why Coetzee's
Disgrace Should and Should Not Be Read in Terms of an Ethics of Perception. *Partial*
Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas 11 (2):233-255.
***Disgrace* essay assigned**
- W. Mar 8 ***Disgrace* and ethical imagination II**
Marais, Mike (2001). Very Morbid Phenomena: "Liberal Funk", the "Lucy-syndrome"
and JM Coetzee's *Disgrace*. *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* 6
(1):32-38.
Marais, Mike (2006). J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Task of the Imagination. *Journal*
of Modern Literature 29 (2):75-93.
- M. Mar 13 **No class (Spring Recess)**
***Disgrace* essay due**
- W. Mar 15 **No class (Spring Recess)**

4. Literature and/as moral philosophy

- M. Mar 20 **Can literature be moral philosophy?**
Raphael, D. D. (1983). Can Literature Be Moral Philosophy? *New Literary History* 15(1):
1-12.
Diamond, Cora (1983). Having a Rough Story about What Moral Philosophy Is. *New*
Literary History 15(1): 155-169.

- W. Mar 22 **Ethics and arguments**
 O'Neill, Onora (1980). Critical Review of Clarke, *The Moral Status of Animals*. *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (7):440-446.
 Diamond, Cora (1991). Anything But Argument, in *The Realistic Spirit*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 291-308.
- M. Mar 27 **Ethics and examples**
 O'Neill, Onora (1986). The Power of Example. *Philosophy* 61(235): 5-29.
Literature and/as moral philosophy worksheet assigned
- W. Mar 29 **The ongoing quarrel between philosophy and literature**
 Mulhall, Stephen (2009). *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, chapter 1, "Introduction: The Ancient Quarrel," pp. 1-18.

5. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* and literature as moral philosophy

- M. Apr 3 **Coetzee and Kafka**
 Kafka, Franz (1917). A Report to an Academy.
Literature and/as moral philosophy worksheet due
- W. Apr 5 ***Elizabeth Costello I***
 Coetzee, J.M. (2004). *Elizabeth Costello*. New York: Penguin Books, lesson 1: Realism, pp. 1-32.
- M. Apr 10 ***Elizabeth Costello II***
Elizabeth Costello, lesson 2: The Novel in Africa, pp. 33-55.
- W. Apr 12 ***Elizabeth Costello III***
Elizabeth Costello, lesson 3: The Lives of Animals, ONE: The Philosophers and the Animals, pp. 57-87.
 Nagel, Thomas (1979). What is it Like to be a Bat? In *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- M. Apr 17 **No class**
- W. Apr 19 ***Elizabeth Costello IV***
Elizabeth Costello, lesson 4, The Lives of Animals, TWO: The Poets and the Animals, pp. 89-112.
- M. Apr 24 **Philosophy, literature, and the lives of animals I**
 Garber, Marjorie (1999), Reflections on The Lives of Animals, pp. 73-84
 Singer, Peter (1999), Reflections on The Lives of Animals, pp. 85-91.
 Mulhall, pp. 58-68.
- W. Apr 26 **Philosophy, literature, and the lives of animals II**
 Mulhall, pp. 69-94.

- M. May 1 ***Elizabeth Costello V***
Kafka, Franz (1915). Before the Law.
Elizabeth Costello, lesson 8: At the Gate, pp. 187-218.
- W. May 3 ***Elizabeth Costello VI***
Elizabeth Costello, postscript, “Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos,” pp. 221-224.
Pippin, Robert (2017). Philosophical Fiction? On J. M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*.
Republic of Letters 5(1): 1-14.
***Elizabeth Costello* essay assigned**
- W. May 10 ***Elizabeth Costello* essay due**