

Humanities and its Relevance to the Contemporary World Syllabus

Fall 2015 Thursday: 2-4:30 pm HHum 205-0101

Professor: Sara D. Schotland, Ph.D., J.D.

Course Description

This course illustrates the relevance of the humanities to the contemporary world by examining ethical, social, and moral problems that challenge us today, and asking how the humanities can help us understand and address these challenges. The issues examined include race relations and injustice, income inequality, rape, euthanasia, the death penalty, the law of war; and First Amendment freedoms. This is an inter-disciplinary course: our readings will be drawn from ethics, public policy “white papers,” short stories, and novels. We will also watch and discuss documentary and Hollywood films that bear on these policy issues and social challenges.

This course has as its basic premise that the study of humanities offers us a valuable perspective by giving us vicarious experience about the lives of others different from ourselves. We can then apply this understanding as we approach difficult challenges and consider policy options. The course will encourage critical thinking and an understanding of the complexity of the problems addressed rather than point to a yes/no position or a facile solution. Topics, readings and film will include

- Moral issues arising in the conduct of war: Shakespeare’s *Henry V* and Kenneth Branagh’s film *Henry V*
- The problem of racist law enforcement: “A black life is worth a white life”: Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities*; poems by various African American authors
- The death penalty: kill or reform it? Criminology essays on the purposes and failings of capital punishment; short stories by Paul Dunbar and Theodore Dreiser; Stephen King’s film *The Green Mile* and *Dead Man Walking*; documentary on Aileen Wournos
- Infanticide: cause and cure: Maupssant’s “Rosalie Prudent,” the *Yates* case; film of “*Medea*”
- The trauma of rape and how to address rape complaints in our courts: Toni Morrison’s *Bluest Eye*; Margaret Atwood’s “*Stone Mattress*”; Atticus Finch’s cross examination from the film *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Income Inequality, social oppression, and the risk of revolt: Aravind Agida’s *White Tiger*, Isaac Asimov’s robot stories
- First Amendment issues including censorship of “racy” texts, controversial “speech” on license plates, pornography, and use of the “N” word: short story by Gwendolyn Brooks, excerpts from *Huckleberry Finn*, *Bluest Eye*
- Euthanasia and the “right to die”: Writings by disability advocates; Kirk Vonnegut’s science fiction; short stories by Alice Walker and Katherine Anne Porter
- Developments in science and technology: A threat to our “humanity”? What is the future of genetic engineering?: Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*

Goals of the course:

- To appreciate the relevance of literature and the arts to understanding the lives and perspectives of other individuals and ethnic groups whose life experiences may differ considerably from our own circumstances; to apply this understanding to ethical dilemmas, social justice issues, and public policy choices

- To understand the complexity of key social, economic, and public policy issues, and take a sophisticated approach that recognizes opposing points of view, identifies problems and considers alternatives
- To help develop your critical thinking, advocacy, and writing skills. It is important to understand the difference between effective and unpersuasive arguments, and to have the ability to critically and carefully analyze the arguments of others. I will provide students with a basic set of “rhetorical advocacy” tools drawn from classic rhetoric. This course should help you to write more sharply organized, focused and effective essays and to participate with confidence in public policy debates.

Course requirements: (a) a short essay on either a film or short story that engages with a contemporary policy issue; (b) a midterm project that is, at the student’s election, either i) a report on an “applied humanities” such as a volunteer service project; (ii) an original work of fiction; (iii) an essay that reflects the student’s response to/learning from this course; the paper may relate to the student’s Keystone project; (c) a final collaborative powerpoint “teach back” in which students address a policy issue of their choice using literature or visual narratives to provide insight .

In addition, each student is requested to informally contribute occasionally to the course “blog” (informal, ungraded, brief contribution).

See course requirements guide for details on course requirements.

Schedule of Readings and Class Discussion

All readings are on ELMS except for the novels required to be purchased

Course Introduction 9/3

Affirmative Action

- Langston Hughes’s “One Friday Morning”; Corcoran’s apology to Lois Maillot Jones; articles on affirmative action (ELMS) **9/3**

Moral issues arising in the conduct of war

- Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, Act 1, sc. 2; Act 3, sc. 3 and 6; and Act 4 (except sc. 7) **9/10**
- Film in class: Branagh’s *Henry V*

The problem of racist law enforcement: “A black life is worth a white life”

- Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities*, excerpts **9/17**

First Amendment issues including censorship, controversial “speech” on license plates, use of the “N” word, the “R” word, and the Redskins name

- Gwendolyn Brooks’s story “Self Solace”; excerpt from Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*; Articles on use of N word (ELMS) **9/24**
- In class: Explanation of short essay requirements

The problem of Infanticide

- Guy de Maupssant's "Rosalie Prudent" and "A Father's Confession"; article on infanticide and the Andrea Yates case (ELMS) **10/1**
- Film in class: *Medea*

Short essays due 10/1

The death penalty: kill or reform it?

- Paul Dunbar's "The Lynching of Jube Benson" and Theodore Dreiser's "Nigger Jeff"; Goodman, Race and the Death Penalty (ELMS) **10/8**
 - Film in class: *The Green Mile*

Euthanasia and the "right to die"

- Tolstoy's Death of "Ivan Ilych," Ch. 4-end; Arna Bontemps's "A Summer Tragedy," Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Grannie Weatherill"; articles on euthanasia and right to die (ELMS) **10/15**

Midterm submissions due (Short stories, essays, or reports on service projects)

- Informal in class discussion of student's submissions **10/22**

The trauma of rape and how to address rape complaints

- Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye*; Margaret Atwood's "Stone Mattress" **10/29**
- Film in class: Atticus Finch's cross examination from the film *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Income Inequality, social oppression, and the risk of revolt

- Aravind Agida's *White Tiger* **11/5**
- Isaac Asimov's "Robot Dreams"

Developments in science and technology: A threat to our "humanity"?

- Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (ELMS); readings on designer babies **11/12**
- Film in class: *Gattaca*

Student Presentations of Final Powerpoints

- Nine students **11/19 (no class 11/26)**
- Eight students **12/3**
- Eight students **12/10**

Texts Required for Purchase

- William Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, Arden ISBN 904271081
- Tom Wolfe, *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Dial, ISBN 0553381342
- Aravind Adiga, *White Tiger*, Free Press, ISBN 1416562605
- Toni Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, Vintage ISBN 0307278441

Grades will be determined as follows: 20% class participation; 20% short essay, 20% individual presentation, 40% final paper or project.

A+	100 – 97
A	96.9 – 93
A-	92.9 – 90
B+	89.9 – 87
B	86.9 – 83
B-	82.9 – 80
C+	79.9 – 77
C	76.9 – 73
C-	72.9 – 70
D+	69.9 – 67
D	66.9 – 63
D-	62.9 – 60
F	Below 60

Office Hours

Before and after class or please arrange an appointment by email: sschotland@cgsh.com or ss735@georgetown.edu or schotlan@umd.edu.

Academic Integrity & the Honors College

The University is an academic community. Its fundamental purpose is the pursuit of knowledge. Like all other communities, the University can function properly only if its members adhere to clearly established goals and values. Essential to the fundamental purpose of the University is the commitment to the principles of truth and academic honesty. Accordingly, the Code of Academic Integrity is designed to ensure that the principle of academic honesty is upheld. While all members of the University share this responsibility, The Code of Academic Integrity is designed so that special responsibility for upholding the principle of academic honesty lies with the students.

All University of Maryland students are asked to write and sign the following Honor Pledge to all submitted assignments and exams:

I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance on this assignment/examination.

The University of Maryland honor system is fully described in the Code of Academic Integrity. Please read: www.studenthonorcouncil.umd.edu/code.html. The Code is administered by an all-student Honor Council. The student Honor Council office is located in room 2118 Mitchell Building and can be reached at 301-314-8204.

The Honors College works to enrich its community life by promoting an atmosphere of honesty, trust, and mutual responsibility. In the event that a Honors College student is found responsible for a violation of the Code of Academic Integrity by the Student Honor Council, he or she will be dismissed from the Honors College for the semester in which the violation took place and for all subsequent semesters in which the student is enrolled as an undergraduate at Maryland.

Course Evaluation

Your feedback in the evaluation of courses through CourseEvalUM is confidential and important to the improvement of teaching and learning at the University as well as to the tenure and promotion process. CourseEvalUM will be open for you to complete your evaluations for fall semester courses between Tuesday, December 1 and Sunday, December 13. You can go directly to the website (www.courseevalum.umd.edu) to complete your evaluations starting December 1. By completing all of your evaluations each semester, you will be able to access the summary reports for thousands of courses online at Testudo.

Rev'd 9/4/15