

Philosophy through Literature COURSE OUTLINE

Week 1 *Oedipus Tyrannos [or Rex]* by Sophocles (496 – 406 BC)

I'll be using the E F Watling translation (Penguin edition)

<https://archive.org/details/Oedipus.Rex.Sophocles.trans.Watling/page/n3/mode/2up>

Themes:

Attempts to make sense of humans' place in the cosmos.

Determinism, fatalism, predestination, free will. Are we like Oedipus in thinking that we can make choices when in fact we can't?

How does foreknowledge, by means of oracles and prophecies, fit with the notion of free will?

Dike – the rightness of nature

The role of the gods (and, later, of God).

Is it consistent to ascribe omnipotence, omniscience and all-goodness to God?

Theodicy (justifying the works of God to humans).

Ancient Greek versus Christian views on whether actions are to be evaluated by the agent's intention.

How fact and value feature in morality.

Hubris and the mistake of seeking knowledge.

The paradox of tragedy.

The Oedipus complex

Attachments:

from *From Religion to Philosophy* Francis Cornford, chapter 1

Oedipus -- the best of all possible worlds

from *Paradise Lost*, Book 3 John Milton

from *Short History of Ethics*, Alasdair MacIntyre

from *the Interpretation of Dreams* Sigmund Freud

Week 2 *Hamlet* Shakespeare

Themes:

Hamlet and the transformation of the Jacobean revenge tragedy
Hamlet and Existentialism

Play-acting and 'seeming'. The ambiguity of 'act' – sincerity and its impossibility

'Assume a virtue if you have it not ...' The *practice* of virtue.

Polonius's 'gem': How important is it to be true to yourself, and what does 'being true to yourself' amount to?

'What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?' Is the sincerity of an emotion a matter of whether, and how much, it is *felt*?

To what extent is emotion *felt*, and to what extent is emotion a matter of *cognition*?

'Nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so.' Stoicism and pre-empting the emotional response.

Hamlet's failure to feel. How important is emotion, and how important should it be?

Hamlet's failure to act.

The four dimensions of human action (John Hyman): physical, psychological, intellectual, ethical.

'What a piece of work is man?' Humans as transcending 'the beasts', or as themselves being animals.

Week 3: Nature, epiphany, the ineffable

Attachments:

Nature, Epiphany, the ineffable, selected poems + Blake excerpt from letter
From *Essays in Radical Empiricism* William James
from *Critique of Judgement* Immanuel Kant (optional – v difficult)

Themes:

'Nature' as perceived before and after Romanticism

How much does our sense of the numinous (in nature) correspond to *something real*? How much is it just a neural freak that we feel it?

Poets have often invoked God or gods as the backing to nature.
Wordsworth and Plato's Theory of Recollection
Do atheism, knowledge of evolution, and nihilism detract from numinosity?

The 'pathetic fallacy'.

Is it just us, or ...? The fusion of subjective and objective in what we feel about nature.

Humans in, humans above, nature.

Week 4: Bliss

Attachments:

'Bliss' Katherine Mansfield
'O my soul's joy ...' from *Othello* Shakespeare
Happiness excerpt from Tom Stoppard
'Of Mere Being' Wallace Stevens
William James emotion excerpts

Themes:

To what extent is emotion *felt*, and to what extent is emotion a matter of *cognition*? (cf Week 2)

How far is happiness physical and irrational? The depressive.

How far is Bertha's bliss dependent on her circumstances?

Contrast of current Western notion of 'happiness' with Aristotle's *eudaimonia*.

How far are feelings of elation and bliss delusory? How far is reality, instead, a matter of '... the black cat following the grey cat ...' – unadorned baseness and squalour?

Interpreting (and misinterpreting) other people. The problem of other minds.

'The pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still.' The human isolated in nature, and from others.

Week 5: *Heart of Darkness* Joseph Conrad

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/219/219-h/219-h.htm> (although better to have the actual book)

Attachments: (yet to be sent)

Rousseau excerpt from letter to Malesherbes,
excerpt from *Origins of Inequality*

Freud excerpt from *Civilisation and its Discontents*

Themes:

What is civilisation?

The way Romanticism and the cult of primitivism make us suspicious of civilisation

The way postcolonial awareness makes us suspicious of civilisation.

Freud on the pros and cons of civilisation.

Heart of Darkness has been accused of being racist: is that fair?

Week 6: Love

Attachments:

LOVE: Selected poems + Iris Murdoch, Wittgenstein and Gide

From *Reasons of Love* by Harry Frankfurt

From *Symposium* Plato

Themes:

What does loving someone amount to?

When you love someone, what exactly are you loving – body, mind, character, essence, soul? A mixture of these? Or what?

The merits of loving ‘warts and all’ versus doing as Aristotle advises -- ditching any friend whose moral worth seems dubious.

Loving for no reason other than love’s sake (Harry Frankfurt and Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

In order to count as love, how long-lasting must be a love be?

Love as solipsism, love as world-embracement, or (Plato) love as both

Week 7: The Ghost Story –

guest speaker: Lucy Lethbridge, author of *Servants* and *Tourists*

Week 8: The Self and its Splits; Memory, Mood

Attachments:

The Self and its Splits; Memory, Mood Selected poems

from *A Treatise of Human Nature* David Hume Book 1, Part 4, Section 6, pp 251-4

from William James 'The Place of Affectional Facts in a World of Pure Experience'

from Schopenhauer: self as the will, self as body and the unconscious

Themes

'You would not find out the boundaries of soul, even by travelling along every path: so deep a measure does it have.' (Heraclitus)

The non-existent self (Hume, Buddhism, Dennett, etc.)

Should we consider memory to be the basis for continuity of self, or does it, instead, show up the self's discontinuity?

Mood's suffusion of the world.

The position of humans in nature; the self as subject and as object.

Week 9: *Silas Marner* George Eliot –

guest speaker: Kathy O'Shaughnessy, author of *In Love with George Eliot*

Week 10: ?