

PHILOSOPHY AND FICTION

PHIL 6550, Fall 2020

Mondays, 2:30 pm – 4:00 pm plus asynchronous time

Meet up via Zoom, peer critique via Google Docs

Office Hours: by appointment

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Introduction

Creative writing and fiction have always been important for philosophy. Philosophers such as Plato, Zhuangzi, Sartre and De Beauvoir have used fiction to convey important philosophical ideas. Academic philosophers today also rely on stories, in particular thought experiments, to test out their ideas or to argue their case.

Being able to convey your ideas through story is a critical skill to master in philosophy graduate school. In this course, you will learn how fiction can be a medium for doing philosophy. You will learn this in two ways: by reading and analyzing contemporary and classic philosophical fiction, and by writing your own philosophical fiction. The skills you learn as a writer of fiction are transferrable and useful, as you will need to learn to build up tension, dose the background information carefully, and connect emotionally with your readers. Also, your prose will need to be engaging and understandable, you will learn to remove unnecessary hurdles for the reader, which is crucial for the craft of writing non-fiction as well.

Student Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes of this course are in line with the aims of a liberal arts education. I want to help you gain useful skills both for philosophy and alt-ac (non-academic) careers. In particular, after following this course you will:

- Critically examine yourself, the influences that narratives around you have had on you, and how you make narratives to understand both yourself and your world.
- This course will hopefully contribute to an understanding of how philosophy can be done, and what forms it can take.
- As Martha Nussbaum indicated, a liberal arts education helps us to gain narrative imagination. This is the insight of the experiences of others through reading about their experiences in narrative (story, autobiography) format. By writing your own fiction and analyzing that of others, your narrative imagination expands.
- You will be able to emotionally and narratively connect with your readers.

Structure and organization of the course

This course is online only. We will do a mix of synchronous and asynchronous meets to reduce Zoom fatigue. The course is organized as follows:

- Monday, 2:30 – 4:00 PM. Meet up via Zoom, consisting of the following parts
 - 2:30 – 2:40 Group reflection on writing assignment of last week (what went well, what was tricky, any insights?).
 - 2:40 – 3:50 Group discussion led by one grad student, on the work of fiction for this week. Each week, a different student leads the discussion on the short story or excerpt that is scheduled for that week. Everyone reads the story/excerpt. In addition, the student who leads discussion starts with some brief thoughts on the story/excerpt and prepares a few questions to ask the group as a starting point for further reflection.
 - 3:50 – 4:00 I introduce the next writing assignment and provide some explanation (also via email)
- by Thursday evening: please put your writing assignment in the shared Google drive.
- by Monday noon: choose two assignments of other students from the Google drive and provide peer critique in the form of friendly, constructive comments directly in the Google document (deadline 12 noon on Monday). Preferably, everyone ends up with two sets of peer critiques (so don't choose something that already has two critiques).

Coursework

Low-stakes small exercises, 20% total grade

The small exercises range between 500 and 1500 words are assigned weekly except for the end of semester. They are marked either as pass/fail. If you've done the assignment it should be a pass (awarded the full score). See detailed schedule for what these assignments look like. The deadline is always Thursday 11:00 PM of the week of the assignment. You need to submit these to a shared Google Drive that will be available to everyone who takes this course.

Midterm: book review, 40% of total grade

Write a paper of about 3000-6000 words where you analyze a work of fiction, e.g., a novel, short story, television series, of your choice. Please let me know what you choose. It can be anything, from any time period, but it should **not** be one of the assigned fiction readings of this course. Deadline: October 12.

Final: short story, 40% of total grade

Write a short story, anywhere between 3000 and 6000 words of philosophical fiction. We will workshop this with the group through our Zoom meetings in the final two weeks of this course. Deadline: December 1

Course materials

I require only one book for purchase (there are other translations, but this one is the best, so I want to use this one: Ibn Tufayl (trans. Lenn Evan Goodman). (2009). *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Other materials will be made available through Blackboard, or can be found through the links. Here is a list of all the materials that will be made available or that can be used as further reading:

Stories we will review

Check the schedule to see when we will review what story.

Cavendish, Margaret. (1666) *The description of a New World, called the Blazing-World*.
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/51783>

Chiang, T. (2001) *Hell is the absence of God*.
<https://tinyurl.com/y4ptsxr4>

Jemisin, N.K. (2016). *The city born great*.
<https://www.tor.com/2016/09/28/the-city-born-great/>

De Cruz, H., De Smedt, J. and Schwitzgebel, S. (2021). Introductory Dispute Concerning Science Fiction, Philosophy, and the Nutritional Content of Maraschino Cherries. In: H. De Cruz, J. De Smedt, and E. Schwitzgebel (Eds.), *Philosophy through science fiction stories. Exploring the boundaries of the possible*. London: Bloomsbury
<https://tinyurl.com/yy25o9lz>

Ibn Tufayl (trans. Lenn Evan Goodman). (2009). *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Greenblatt, A.C. (2018). *And yet*.
<https://uncannymagazine.com/article/and-yet/>

Le Guin, Ursula K. (1974). *The ones who walk away from Omelas*.
<https://tinyurl.com/y4vxj3wn>

Liu, Ken. (2012). *Paper menagerie*
<https://io9.gizmodo.com/read-ken-lius-amazing-story-that-swept-the-hugo-nebula-5958919>

Writing guides

I provide these to help you with writing fiction, reading them is entirely optional. They might give you ideas for the writing assignments and for the final.

Anonymous. Point of view definitions and examples: Getting POV right
<https://www.nownovel.com/blog/different-points-of-view-tips/>

Alexander, Alma (2020). Three ways to build a world (very useful information on how to build your world).
<https://www.almaalexander.org/three-ways-to-build-a-world/>

- Cleary, Skye (2017). A Novelist's Tips for Writing Philosophical Fiction (some basic tips on how to begin your story)
<https://tinyurl.com/y6m2p2ad>
- Gaffney, David (2012). Stories in your pocket: how to write flash fiction (a quick guide for writing very short stories)
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/may/14/how-to-write-flash-fiction>
- Le Guin, Ursula. Excerpt from *Steering the craft* on writing gorgeous prose (it has to sound good in your head)
<https://lithub.com/a-writing-lesson-from-ursula-k-leguin/>
- Maass, Donald. (2016). *The emotional craft of fiction*. Cincinnati (OH): Writer's Digest (you don't need to buy this. But if you were to buy one writing guide, I found it one of the most useful writing guides out there).
- Uckelman, Sara (2017). Plot as argument, argument as plot (three parts) (a very detailed analysis about how story and writing a philosophical article are not so different after all)
<https://blog.apaonline.org/2017/09/05/writing-a-philosophical-novel-part-1/>
<https://tinyurl.com/y5dz8tpe>
<https://blog.apaonline.org/2017/09/07/structuring-a-philosophical-novel/>

Secondary literature on philosophical fiction

We will not discuss these during class. However, it is strongly recommended to read at least some of these to give you some ideas/insights for your philosophical book review. Copies of these articles will be provided via Blackboard.

- Badura, C., & Berto, F. (2019). Truth in fiction, impossible worlds, and belief revision. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 97(1), 178–193.
- Cameron, R.P. (2015). Improve your thought experiments overnight with speculative fiction. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 39, 29–45. Camp, E. (2017). Perspectives in imaginative engagement with fiction. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 31(1), 73–102.
- De Smedt, J., & De Cruz, H. (2015). The Epistemic Value of Speculative Fiction. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 39, 58–77.
- Friend, S. (2017). The real foundation of fictional worlds. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 95, 29–42.
- Lewis, D. (1978). Truth in fiction. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15, 37–46.
- Stump, E. (2010). *Wandering in darkness*, chapters 2 and 4. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, J. (2020). The trolley problem problem. *Aeon Magazine*.
<https://aeon.co/essays/what-isthe-problem-with-ethical-trolley-problems>

Grading system

Except for the low-stakes small exercises (which are graded pass/fail), your work will be evaluated using the 0-4.000 SLU system. As the assignments are somewhat unusual for a grad course, the emphasis will be on quality of writing and originality. I want to see an original angle. Don't plagiarize! All work need to be yours—I know fiction writing can be daunting, but this is a good opportunity to learn.

Schedule (subject to change)

- Week 1, August 17: How can fiction be relevant for philosophy? What do you think of the three positions in this story? (discussion led by instructor, unlike most other sessions where one of you will lead discussion)

Reading: De Cruz, H., De Smedt, J. and Schwitzgebel, S. (2021). Introductory Dispute Concerning Science Fiction, Philosophy, and the Nutritional Content of Maraschino Cherries (short story).

Assignment: Philosophers such as Plato, Galileo and Hume, have traditionally used dialogue to convey philosophical ideas. Rewrite an argument, or part of an argument of a philosophical idea as a dialogue, using max. 2 single-spaced pages.

- Week 2, August 24: Story, plot, and big idea. In this session we will see the distinction between plot, story, and big idea. A lot of analysis of writing focuses on plot. But story, the details on how the plot plays out, are just as important. The big idea (sometimes called the moral) behind the story is also important, as it drives the story forward and helps us care about it.

Reading: Ted Chiang, *Hell is the absence of God* (novelette)

Assignment: Think of a philosophically meaningful folktale or story told in your family, or fairy tale you heard as a child. Retell that story in your own words, in about 1 single-spaced page, then try to get out the big idea.

- Week 3, August 31: Viewpoint and character. We here examine the different ways to choose character, viewpoint and what it conveys.

Reading: A.C. Greenblatt, *And yet* (short story)

Assignment: Retell a philosophical thought experiment (e.g., Plato's cave, the trolley problem) in an evocative and creative way in about 500 words. Then retell it again, but use a different point of view. Then retell it a third time, again using a different point of view. For example, you could write the trolley problem in the first person, limited third person, omniscient narrator. Try to ask yourself as you do this: how does changing the viewpoint change our appreciation of this thought experiment?

- Week 4, September 7: Emotion matters. How do philosophers use emotion to convey their ideas?

Reading: Ken Liu, Paper menagerie (short story)

Assignment: describe a short situation with a certain moral weight, or where the author gets to feel the moral weight of what the character or characters are doing. There is the device of saving the cat. (max 1 page, single paced).

- Week 5, September 14: Transformed and transported by fiction, Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, part 1

Reading: Ibn Tufayl, pp. 85–top of 127.

Assignment: Describe a transformative experience (e.g., someone bitten by a vampire, someone climbing a mountain for the first time, someone having a religious Damascus like conversion experience) in vivid detail, on max 1 page, single-spaced.

- Week 6, September 21: Philosophy is born in wonder, Ibn Tufayl, part 2

Reading: Ibn Tufayl, pp. 127–157 (up until friendship)

Assignment: Did you ever feel like Hayy in the story? Did you ever look around you in wonder, awe or delight (I hope the answer is yes!)? Describe, from memory, a place you've been to, either nature, or human-made, that conveyed a sense of wonder to you. Describe the sensory details, how you felt, what you thought. (max one page).

- Week 7, September 28: What can we learn from others, Ibn Tufayl, part 3

Reading: Ibn Tufayl, pp. 157–166 (ending)

Assignment: No Writing exercise. I want you to think this week of which work of fiction you'd like to write a philosophical review of, and I will then discuss with you what aspects you might focus on. Send me your idea via email, with a brief rationale for why you think this work is philosophically interesting, by the Thursday deadline.

- Week 8, October 5, The importance of world-building.

Reading: The city born great, by NK Jemisin

Assignment: Write a short one-page situation (does not need to be a standalone story) where place plays a central story; you can use a city, like in Jemisin's story, or a forest or a beach, or anything, but it needs to be specific. E.g., not just a generic forest, but a pinewood in Lapland, not just a beach, but the beach in Santa Barbara, etc.

- Week 9, October 12, Incorporating philosophy into your story

Reading: Le Guin, Ursula K., *The ones who walk away from Omelas*.

Assignment: Write a one (max 1.5 page) description of a traveler who visits, for the first time, a utopian city. What does your character encounter? Provide some hints of potential dystopian elements in your utopia.

Midterm essay due on October 12.

- Week 10, October 19, Short and sweet. How flash fiction works and how it can be philosophically relevant.

Reading: Excerpts from the *Zhuangzi* (will be provided).

Assignment: Try to use 400 words or less to write a short philosophically interesting story. With flash fiction, you need to move right into it!

- Week 11, October 26, The history of speculative fiction, with Margaret Cavendish, *Blazing world*, part 1

Reading: *Blazing world*, part 1

Assignment: It is time to start your story. Come up with some story ideas, a central idea of a plot or some characters. Nothing coherent yet. You could put out several ideas that maybe your peers can comment on (comment gently—you don't want to kill ideas!)

- Week 12, November 2, Margaret Cavendish, *Blazing world*, part 2

Reading: *Blazing world*, part 2

Assignment: Continue drafting your story (you don't need to put anything in the folder)

- Week 13, November 9, Margaret Cavendish, *Blazing world*, part 3

Reading: *Blazing world*, part 3

Assignment: Continue drafting your story (put your first rough draft in the folder by Thursday. Everyone will read the first 4 stories we will review by November 16).

- Week 14, November 16, Group discussions of stories. We will workshop the first 4 stories during this session (session lasts from 2:30 to 4 PM,)
- Week 15, November 23, Group discussions of stories. We will workshop the remaining 4 stories during this session (session lasts from 2:30 to 4 PM)

- Final essay due November 1

Final copy of your story is due December 2.

Student Success Center Syllabus Statement

In recognition that people learn in a variety of ways and that learning is influenced by multiple factors (e.g., prior experience, study skills, learning disability), resources to support student success are available on campus. The Student Success Center assists students with academic-related services and is located in the Busch Student Center (Suite, 331). Students can visit <https://www.slu.edu/life-at-slu/student-success-center/> to learn more about tutoring services, university writing services, disability services, and academic coaching.

Disability Services Academic Accommodations Syllabus Statement

Students with a documented disability who wish to request academic accommodations must formally register their disability with the University. Once successfully registered, students also must notify their course instructor that they wish to use their approved accommodations in the course.

Please contact Disability Services to schedule an appointment to discuss accommodation requests and eligibility requirements. Most students on the St. Louis campus will contact Disability Services, located in the Student Success Center and available by email at disability_services@slu.edu or by phone at 314.977.3484. Once approved, information about a student's eligibility for academic accommodations will be shared with course instructors by email from Disability Services and within the instructor's official course roster. Students who do not have a documented disability but who think they may have one also are encouraged to contact Disability Services. Confidentiality will be observed in all inquiries.

Note: due to accreditation requirements, regulatory differences, and/or location-specific resources, the School of Law, the School of Medicine, and SLU Madrid have their own standard language for syllabus statements related to disability accommodations. Faculty in those units should seek guidance for syllabus requirements from their dean's office.

Title IX Syllabus Statement

Saint Louis University and its faculty are committed to supporting our students and seeking an environment that is free of bias, discrimination, and harassment. If you have encountered any form of sexual misconduct (e.g., sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, domestic or dating violence), we encourage you to report this to the University. If you speak with a faculty member about an incident that involves a Title IX matter, that faculty member must notify SLU's Title IX coordinator (or that person's equivalent on your campus) and share the basic facts of your experience. This is true even if you ask the faculty member not to disclose the incident. The Title IX contact will then be

available to assist you in understanding all of your options and in connecting you with all possible resources on and off campus.

For most students on the St. Louis campus, the appropriate contact is Anna R. Kratky (DuBourg Hall, room 36; akratky@slu.edu; 314-977- 3886). If you wish to speak with a confidential source, you may contact the counselors at the University Counseling Center at 314-977-TALK. To view SLU’s sexual misconduct policy, and for resources, please visit the following web addresses: <https://www.slu.edu/here4you> and <https://www.slu.edu/general-counsel>.

Academic Integrity Statement

Academic integrity is honest, truthful and responsible conduct in all academic endeavors. The mission of Saint Louis University is “the pursuit of truth for the greater glory of God and for the service of humanity.” Accordingly, all acts of falsehood demean and compromise the corporate endeavors of teaching, research, health care, and community service through which SLU fulfills its mission. The University strives to prepare students for lives of personal and professional integrity, and therefore regards all breaches of academic integrity as matters of serious concern. The full University-level Academic Integrity Policy can be found on the Provost’s Office website at: https://www.slu.edu/provost/policies/academic-and-course/policy_academic-integrity_6-26-2015.pdf.

Additionally, each SLU College, School, and Center has its own academic integrity policies, available on their respective websites.

Instructor’s addendum: universally, plagiarism is a major source of disappointment for your instructors. It takes away the joy of teaching and learning, and prevents you from having a good learning experience. To help you to not plagiarize, I encourage you to read the following: <http://lib.slu.edu/site/services/plagiarism-prevention/students.php>