

**COMPARATIVE LITERATURE 150
VALUES AND ETHICS IN LITERATURE**

BULLETIN INFORMATION

CPLT 150 – Values and Ethics in Literature (3 credit hrs)

Course Description:

Analysis of major works of world literature focusing on values, ethics, and social responsibility.

SAMPLE COURSE OVERVIEW

In Virginia, convicts are reading the works of the nineteenth-century Russian writer Leo Tolstoy in a novel experiment to see whether these works of literature can successfully transmit values and inspire self-recognition and ethical growth in violent offenders. In Massachusetts, psychiatrist Jonathan Shay has found the war trauma described in Homer's 8th-century BCE *Iliad* and *Odyssey* a helpful therapeutic tool for psychologically scarred war veterans as they reintegrate into civilian society. The linkage between literature and taught values and a sense of social responsibility has long been acknowledged: the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, after all, writing in *The Republic*, famously barred poets from his ideal state since he feared they might not use their skill to encourage "virtuous thoughts" in readers. As Tolstoy wrote over two millennia later, art "is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity."

Students will learn to analyze and interpret literary texts that address questions of personal and societal values, i.e., moral principles that guide human behavior; decision-making; and defining and leading "a good life." We will begin by examining Plato's and Tolstoy's respective visions of the role of literature in society, as we debate the two authors' opinions in the context of our own views and experiences. We will then move on to examine specific values exemplified in particular works of world literature, as we delve into a broad range of national literary traditions and literary genres over a wide sweep of time. While we will of course acknowledge and discuss the wider range of values discussed in all these works of literature, we will nonetheless focus on one dominant value in each week's textual discussion. Values we will encounter and analyze include **compassion, justice, community, love, self-discipline, integrity, loyalty, commitment, self-discovery, happiness, and responsibility**. Authors and literary traditions under discussion include **Leo Tolstoy (Russian, nineteenth century), Martin Luther King, Jr. (American, twentieth century), Aldo Leopold (American, twentieth century), Marguerite de Navarre (French, sixteenth century), Vergil (Roman, first century BCE), Plato (Greek, fourth century BCE), Carlos Fuentes (Mexican, twentieth century), Eileen Chang (Chinese, twentieth century), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (German, nineteenth century), Mary Lavin (Irish, twentieth century), and Alexander Solzhenitsyn (Russian, twentieth century)**. As we focus on these diverse writers' values-based discourse, we will explore the effects of literature on our own responses to ethical challenges and explorations.

ITEMIZED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon successful completion of CPLT 150, students will be able to:

1. Analyze literary texts, noting style, genre, period, composition, and context of the work
2. Discuss specific artistic periods as related to the course texts with regard to history, development, and major practitioners
3. Describe the thematic content of texts, with particular focus on authors' treatment of ethical and moral issues
4. Identify the source and function of values
5. Compare the values, norms, and ideals in selected works of world literature and discuss the development of values-focused discourse in these works
6. Demonstrate an understanding of the importance of values, ethics, and social responsibility for the self and for contemporary society as discussed and brought out in literary texts
7. Reflect on how values shape decision-making, both within literary texts and in the societies they describe, as well as how values influence personal and community ethics and decision-making
8. Relate course discussions of values, ethics and responsibilities to students' own capacities to address ethical and social challenges

SAMPLE REQUIRED TEXTS/SUGGESTED READINGS/MATERIALS

1. Eileen Chang, "Lust, Caution," (on Blackboard)
2. Carlos Fuentes, "The Two Shores" (on Blackboard)
3. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, selections (on Blackboard)
4. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"
(http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)
5. Mary Lavin, "Happiness" (on Blackboard)
6. Aldo Leopold, "Land Ethic" (<http://home.btconnect.com/tipiglen/landethic.html>)
7. Marguerite de Navarre, *Heptameron*, Tales 12 and 24 (on Blackboard)
8. Plato, Excerpts from *The Republic; Apology* (on Blackboard)
9. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "Matryona's House"; Excerpts from his Nobel Lecture (on Blackboard)
10. Leo Tolstoy, Excerpts from "What is Art"; "The Death of Ivan Ilych" (on Blackboard)
11. Vergil, *The Aeneid*, Book IV (on Blackboard)

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS AND/OR EXAMS

1. **Blackboard group discussions:** Every week you will be required to post to our class discussion board. Questions about the value and the text are found in this syllabus and will be posted for you to respond to. Since this course is 100% online, your **attendance** will be monitored through your participation in the group discussions and your blog posts. Failure to participate regularly in the discussion boards will negatively affect your grade.
2. **Blog postings:** Your blog posting should reflect on the text and values of the week and respond to the instructor's lecture and to the prompts provided by the instructor, posted and in this syllabus. Be sure to read over the discussion board posts and

incorporate your classmates' comments into your post as you reflect on the role the value of the week plays in your life.

3. **Midterm and final:** The midterm and final exams will be based on the texts, course lectures, and group discussions. The format will be short answer and essays with questions focused on background information about the texts and authors, questions about the texts themselves, and questions about how the value is associated with the text. You will be expected to compare the values, norms, and ideals in the works of world literature we have discussed this semester and discuss the development of values-focused discourse in these works. You will also be presented with a case study that will involve your identification and interpretation of a set of values. The case study will describe a situation with fictional characters and then ask you to explain how the situation should be handled while referring to specific values and ethics we have discussed in the course. Please refer to the framework for ethical decision making found in Supplemental Materials on Blackboard and introduced in the first lecture to guide your thought processes. Each exam will be administered through Blackboard.
4. **Final Project:** Using the medium of your choice (see below), describe how a certain value (or values if you prefer) has been influential in your life and your surroundings. You may wish to reflect on a particular ethical challenge you have faced and how you responded. Be sure to address how the discussions we have had this semester connect to how you lead your life and how you hope to treat and be treated by others in your community. You may convey this information in one of the following manners (and remember to be sure that the medium you choose can be shared with the class through Blackboard!): powerpoint presentation, video, collage using glogster.com, or screenplay. After the projects are due, you will visit and comment on at least five of your classmates' projects.

SAMPLE COURSE OUTLINE WITH TIMELINE OF TOPICS, READINGS/ ASSIGNMENTS, EXAMS/PROJECTS

A chart of weekly responsibilities/deadlines follows:

- Monday/Tuesday: Read assigned text(s) for week. Watch lecture online. (50 minutes)
- Wednesday 5 PM: Blackboard initial post. (50 minutes – not including time to prepare your post)
- Thursday 5 PM: Blackboard responses.
- Friday midnight: Individual blog post. (50 minutes – not including preparation time)
- Monday noon: Blog post responses. Read/prepare next text.

Week 1: LITERATURE AND VALUES

We explore two key writers who have treated the connections between literature and values, and we look at a framework for analyzing ethics and action and introduce key analytic concepts for the interpretation and critical understanding of literary texts.

Text readings: Plato, *The Republic*, excerpts. (Athens, 4th century BCE). Leo Tolstoy, "What is Art," excerpts. (Russia, 1897). On Blackboard.

Lecture points:

Background: Plato: The end of the Peloponnesian War, the 30 Tyrants, the rise of democracy, Socratic questioning and dialogue, Socrates/Plato and stylistic considerations.

Tolstoy: Tolstoy's transformations (privileged upper-class count, soldier, family man and author, convert, penitent nobleman, sage and prophet), the czarist system and censorship; "Aesopian language" in Russian literature.

Themes: The relevance of art (literature, music, painting, etc.) in society. Style in a literary text: questions of authorial intent and effect. The relationship between art and power. Are values "teachable" through literature? Should they be? Do writers have a responsibility to their community and to society at large?

Week 2: COMPASSION

We begin with Tolstoy's 1886 "Death of Ivan Ilych," the text that sparked individual assessment among the Virginia convicts through its portrayal of the importance of compassion for one's fellow human beings—and the psychological and societal devastation caused by its absence.

Text reading: Leo Tolstoy, "The Death of Ivan Ilych" (Russia, 1886). On Blackboard.

Lecture points:

Background: Review: Tolstoy's transformations (privileged upper-class count, soldier, family man and author, convert, penitent nobleman, sage and prophet). The czarist system, the Emancipation of the serfs (native Russians enslaved to landowners) in 1861. Russian Realism: shift from Romanticism and Sentimentalism, connections to calls for change in Russian society. Role and impact of the writer (and Tolstoy in particular) in Russian society. Themes: How does an individual reflect the values of his/her community? How do we respond to the suffering of others? How would we like others to respond to our own? How does the knowledge of inevitable death affect how we view our lives? Should it? How does Tolstoy link the style he chose for this story with its theme?

Week 3: JUSTICE

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" was written as the civil rights leader had been jailed for his participation in marches and sit-ins against racism and segregation. Later that year he would give his famous "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington. Asserting that "whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly," King wrote of an "inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny," as he called for understanding of and commitment to his non-violent call for social justice and equality.

Text reading: Martin Luther King, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (US, 1963). Text can be found at this site: http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

Lecture points:

Background: Segregation in the US and civil disobedience. The context of the letter: Birmingham, AL, summer 1963; the significance of the letter and the March on Washington later that year. The intended audience of the letter, its reception. The genre of the letter. Dr. King's style: whom does he cite? How does he claim authority?

Themes: Interconnectedness of communities, nonviolence, just vs. unjust, racism, differing narratives and perceptions

Week 4: COMMUNITY

Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic," which formed part of his 1948 environmental classic *A Sand County Almanac*, advances some of the same concerns as Dr. King's letter, but with an ecological focus. As Leopold wrote, "All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts." He explained further, "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land."

Text reading: Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac* (US, 1949). Text can be found at this site: <http://home.btconnect.com/tipiglen/landethic.html>

Lecture points:

Background: The American conservation movement. Leopold's growth of popularity in the 1970s and the ecological movement. The literary genre of the essay.

Themes: What makes up a community? Individual responsibility within a community of interdependent parts. How is respect for land included in ethics? How do individuals work together to protect and preserve their community, including the land? Role of economics in protecting a community. What types of genres and literary texts does Leopold draw on in his essay?

Week 5: LOVE

Marguerite de Navarre's 1558 *Heptameron* contains the French author's brief tales of love, loyalty, deception, power, and danger. In Tale 12 (The Duke of Florence, failing to capture the ear of the lady he loves, seeks to have her favours by means of her brother, who ostensibly agrees, but murders the Duke in his bed, thereby ridding his country of a tyrant, saving his own life and preserving the honour of his family) and Tale 24 (Elisor, too forward in disclosing his love to the Queen of Castile, is cruelly treated by her, is put to the test, brought much suffering, but in the end much profit), the author addresses different kinds of love, as she questions what love can endure and the forms it can take.

Text reading: Marguerite de Navarre, *Heptameron*, Tales 12 and 24 (France, sixteenth century). On Blackboard.

Lecture points:

Background: French Christian Humanism and the literary text, Marguerite as woman of power and culture, the conventions of courtly love and their expressions in the culture and literature of the period.

Themes: Gender relations in the text. Types of love in the text; the differences expressed between marriage and love. The relationship between God and love. Narrative structure and its significance: does a multiplicity of narrative voices mean there is no overall truth in the text?

Week 6: SELF-DISCIPLINE

Membership in a community requires some degree of self-discipline; we will consider whether a leader has a particular responsibility to maintain self-discipline for the good of the society s/he heads. In his first-century epic *The Aeneid*, the Roman writer Vergil explained through his portrayal of the lovesick Lydian queen Dido the negative effects on a society when a nation's ruler loses this crucial sense.

Text reading: Vergil, *The Aeneid*, Book 4 (Rome, 1st century BCE). On Blackboard.

Lecture points:

Background: Rome's civil war, the rise of Augustus, the Punic Wars. Responding to Homer's epics: an epic for imperial Rome. The epic form. The relationship between Vergil and Augustus Caesar.

Themes: Can public figures have private lives? Should self-discipline be valued over passion? If so, in what circumstances? Gender and politics. Free will and the Roman gods. The author and the state.

Week 7: Review and midterm.

Week 8: INTEGRITY

Plato's 4th-century BCE *Apology* is a powerful work of literature, despite Plato's conflicting views of art. Condemned to death for his supposed "corruption" of Athenian youth through his constant questioning, the philosopher Socrates nonetheless refuses to renounce his ideas or his methods, accepting death rather than failing to be true to himself and the values he seeks to promote in his society.

Text reading: Plato, *The Apology* (Athens, 4th century BCE). On Blackboard.

Lecture points:

Background: Review: The end of the Peloponnesian War, the 30 Tyrants, the rise of democracy, Socratic questioning, Socrates and Plato, characteristics of style and narration. The *oikos* and the *polis*. Who were the Sophists?

Themes: Do human beings willingly harm one another? Can virtue be taught? Civil disobedience and the Athenian *polis*; views of democracy. Are beliefs worth dying for? N.B. The word "apology" comes from the Greek word for defense-speech and does not mean "apology" as we think of it!

Week 9: LOYALTY

Issues of loyalty to oneself and one's community, however the latter may be defined, surface in the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes' story "The Two Shores." The narrator of the story, a Spaniard captured by Mayans at the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the sixteenth century, serves as a translator for the Spanish military conqueror Cortez but knowingly mistranslates Cortez's words to his defeated enemy. Fuentes' story thus examines the issue of personal responsibility through the prism of language and its power to influence world events.

Text reading: Carlos Fuentes, "The Two Shores," in *The Orange Tree* (Mexico, 1992). On Blackboard.

Lecture points:

Background: The Aztec empire and the emperors Guatemuz and Moctezuma, Cortes and the conquest of Mexico, Geronimo de Aguilar. Historical and cultural influences in Latin-American literature. Postmodernism.

Themes: blending of cultures, power of language and communication, recording of history, choices in loyalty, questions of genre.

Week 10: COMMITMENT

Eileen Chang, a twentieth-century Chinese writer who herself lived through the Japanese occupation of China during World War II, tells a story of political and personal commitment

in “Lust, Caution” (1979). Her main character questions an initial commitment to assassinate a collaborator when personal feelings complicate the picture.

Text reading: Eileen Chang, *Lust, Caution* (China, 1979). On Blackboard.

Lecture points:

Background: China post-WWII. The Japanese occupation of China. Chinese nationalism. Diasporic identity during the Cold War and its expression in literary texts. Chinese modernity and transnationalism. Socially sanctioned literature (Socialist Realism) vs. literature of emotion and linguistic freedom; Chang’s role.

Themes: Types of commitment. The relationship between trust and love. Materialism and its effects.

Week 11: SELF-DISCOVERY

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's play *Faust* tells the story of a scholar, Faust, who is so obsessed with the search for knowledge that he is willing to enter into a pact with the devil to further his goals. A love story and a tale of temptation and redemption, Goethe’s text is one of the world’s great works of literature.

Text reading: Excerpts from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust*: Prologue in Heaven, Night, Outside the City Gate, Study (Germany, 1808, revised 1828-1829). On Blackboard.

Lecture points:

Background: Enlightenment, Romanticism, the Storm and Stress movement in literature. The dramatic genre.

Themes: Knowledge, reason, science and spirituality, moral ambivalence, scenarios of salvation.

Week 12: HAPPINESS

The Irish writer Mary Lavin’s 1969 short story “Happiness” addresses issues of happiness, again by looking at language and how words’ meanings are malleable depending on circumstances. The narrator’s mother claims despite a difficult life always to be “happy,” a term that is misunderstood and rejected by the other characters in the story as untrue until the narrator’s own insight changes her mind at the end of the tale.

Text reading: Mary Lavin, *Happiness* (Ireland, 1968). On Blackboard.

Lecture points:

Background: Concepts of happiness as a value (Aristotle; American Declaration of Independence). Happiness and pleasure: distinctions. The Irish short story.

Themes: Definitions and difficulties in comprehension. Language and its arbitrary qualities. Love and sorrow. Questions of perspective.

Week 13: RESPONSIBILITY

The Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a survivor of the Soviet gulag (prison camp) system who came to be seen as the “conscience” of his nation, wrote the short story “Matryona’s House” (published 1963) to laud the values of a simple peasant who fulfills her responsibilities and exemplifies the best of her community in the face of a repressive Soviet state system. We will also examine and discuss excerpts from Solzhenitsyn’s 1970 Nobel Prize Lecture, in which he claims that the writer has a responsibility to improve the world by promoting values through his literature.

Text readings: Alexander Solzhenitsyn, “Matryona’s House,” “Nobel Lecture” (Russia/Soviet Union, 1963, 1970). On Blackboard.

Lecture points:

Background: The Russian Revolution of 1917, the rise of Soviet power, Stalin’s purges and Khrushchev’s “Thaw.” Solzhenitsyn: from loyal Soviet soldier to concentration camp prisoner to explosive writer to exile in Vermont to triumphant return to post-Soviet Russia.

The development, reign, and characteristics of Socialist Realism in the Soviet state. Writers as the “conscience of the nation.”

Themes: Does a writer have a responsibility to teach values and inspire mutual understanding? What are the individual’s responsibilities in society? Can a faulty system corrupt a nation? Should governments dictate literary style?

Week 14: Final projects.