

REL 327: Biblical Themes in Literature

Instructor: David Reis
Class: M-F 1:00-4:00
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

As one of the foundational documents of Western Civilization, the Bible has generated extensive reflections on many of life's most enduring questions: do God and the devil exist?; what is the nature of good and evil?; how is the cosmos ordered?; and what is the character of the divine-human relationship? This course will explore how writers from the medieval world to the present wrestled with these issues through their interaction with biblical literature. An analysis of various texts (e.g. poetry, fiction, and film) will reveal how authors have used biblical ideas as a lens for attempting to make sense of world and their relationship to God.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Blake, William. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. New York: Dover Publications, 1994.
Dante. *The Divine Comedy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
Lewis, C.S. *The Screwtape Letters*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001.
Marlowe, Christopher. *Dr. Faustus*. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2004.

REQUIREMENTS

1. Readings

The weekly readings will be comprised of both primary and secondary source materials. Primary source readings consist of works written during the particular period under discussion (e.g. *The Divine Comedy*, *Sonny's Blues*). Secondary sources consist of works written by contemporary authors that critically evaluate the problems and issues found in the primary sources. It is expected that both sets of readings will be completed before we discuss them in class.

2. Journals

Each student will compose three reflection essays (approximately three pages) that address how at least two authors 1) examine the specific theme discussed during the week (heaven and hell; God and Satan; and slavery/freedom and sin/salvation), and 2) use the Bible as an intertext to advance their positions. Students will submit these essays to [Moodle](#) at the end of each week.

3. Discussion Group Presentations

Each class will be devoted to a discussion of the primary sources. The presenting group should meet to discuss the readings, and then should submit two questions on the primary readings to [Moodle](#) no later than 9:00 AM the day of class. The presenting group will begin class with a brief presentation (approximately fifteen to twenty minutes) that 1) outlines relevant biographical and historical details of the author(s); 2) identifies the major themes in the readings

and their use of biblical imagery; and 3) provides insight into the thought process that led to the formation of their discussion questions. The discussion questions will then act as a guide for larger class conversation. The presenting group should provide a one-page outline of their presentation to each student, and each non-presenting student will submit a written response to one of the discussion questions.

4. Participation and Attendance

Because this course is heavily structured around class discussions, participation and attendance are essential. Students should notify the instructor of an absence prior to class. A five to seven percent deduction will be assessed for each unexcused absence, and three or more unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for the class. Participation consists of active participation in all class discussions and the submission of responses to student discussion questions. Effort and persistence will be rewarded accordingly.

GRADING

Journal	180 points (36%)	A=500-450
Discussion Group Presentation	100 points (20%)	B=449-400
Participation	160 points (32%)	C=399-350
Attendance	<u>60 points (12%)</u>	D=349-300
Total	500 points (100%)	

COURSE OUTLINE

1/5: Introduction: Reading Literature
Beal, "Intertextuality"
Seneca, *Ep.* 84

Part I: Imagining Heaven and Hell

1/6: Envisioning Descent

Biblical Readings: Jn 14:6 [*Inf.* 1.1-12]; 2 Cor 12:1-4 [*Inf.* 2.28-30]; 1 Pet 3:18-22 [*Inf.* 4.52-63]; Acts 8:9-24 [*Inf.* 19.1-6]; Mt 16:16-19 [*Inf.* 19.13-15, 91-92]; Mt 4:18-22 [*Inf.* 19.93]; Rev 17:1-6 [*Inf.* 19.106-114]; Mt 26:14-16, 20-25, 47-49; 27:3-5 [*Inf.* 34.61-63]

Primary Readings: Dante, *The Divine Comedy*

Introduction (pp. 7-24)

Inferno 1.1-4.102; 5.1-39; 11.1-69; 19.1-133; 34.1-145

Video: *Dante: The Journey of Our Life*

1/7: Envisioning Ascent

Biblical Readings: 2 Cor 12:1-4 [*Purg.* 1.73-75]; Mt 5:8 [*Purg.* 27.8]; Mt 25:34 [*Purg.* 27.58]; Mt 21:9 [*Purg.* 30.19]; Rom 5:12, 18-21 [*Par.* 7.25-42]; 1 Cor 15:35-50 [*Par.* 14.43-60]; Rev 19:9 [*Par.* 24.1]

Primary Readings: Dante, *The Divine Comedy*

Purgatorio 1; 2.1-54; 27; 30; 33

Paradiso 1; 7.1-51; 14.1-60; 23-26; 32-33

1/8: Rethinking Heaven and Hell

Secondary Readings: Hilton, "Blake's Early Works" (pp. 201-204)

Biblical Readings: Isa 34:1-35:10; Ez 4:1-17; Mt 10:34-36; 25:31-46

Primary Readings: Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Video: *William Blake*

1/9: Enlightenment and Escaping “Paradise”

Secondary Readings:

Reinhartz, “The Truman Show and the Great Escape from Paradise”

Perkins, “Gnosticism”

Biblical Readings: Gen 1:1-3:24

Film: *The Truman Show*

Part II: Listening to Satan

1/12: Dealing with the Devil

Biblical Readings: Mt 4:1-11; 7:13-14; 10:28; 12:31-32; Mk 8:34-38; Acts 8:9-24; Rom 6:20-23; 1 John 1:5-10

Primary Readings: Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*

Film: *Doctor Faustus*

1/13: Rewriting Creation: Satanic Observations

Biblical Readings: Gen 1:1-3:24

Primary Readings: Twain, “Letters from the Earth”

1/14: Satan’s Stratagems I

Biblical Readings: Mt 6:5-13; 18:10-22; Mk 13:13b; Jn 15:18-19; Rom 5:1-5; Gal 5:16-26; Eph 6:10-17; 1 Pet 2:18-25

Primary Readings: Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, chs. 1-17

Video: [The Question of God](#) (pt. I)

1/15: Satan’s Stratagems II

Biblical Readings: Lk 10:17-20; Rom 7:14-25; 1 Cor 6:12-20; 7:1-9, 32-38; Eph 5:25-33; Col 3:5-17; 1 Thess 4:2-8; 5:1-11; Jas 4:1-10; 1 Pet 3:1-6

Primary Readings: Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, chs. 18-31

Video: [The Question of God](#) (pt. II)

1/16: The Devil and Suffering

Secondary Readings: Reinhartz, “Cape Fear and the Devil as Savior”

Biblical Readings: Job 1:1-3:26; 11:1-6; 19:1-22; 2 Cor 1:8-11; 6:1-10; 11:23-27; Gal 6:17

Film: *Cape Fear*

Part III: Slavery/Freedom and Sin/Salvation

1/19: Slavery, Exile, Identity

Secondary Readings: Wimbush, *The Bible and African Americans*, 12-32

Biblical Readings: Gen 9:18-27; Ps 137:1-9; Col 3:22-4:1; Eph 6:5-9; Philem

Primary Readings:

1. Defending Slavery:

De Bow’s Review, “Slavery and the Bible”

Stringfellow, “The Bible Argument: Slavery in the Light of Divine Revelation”

2. African-American Texts:

Brown, *Clotel*, chs. 6, 10, 16, 18

Douglass, “[The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro](#)”

Video: [Africans in America](#) (Part III)

1/20: Removing the Mark of Cain: The Civil Rights Movement

Biblical Readings:

1. Amos 5:18-24; Isa 40:4; Ps 30:4-5
2. Deut 34:1-10; Lk 10:25-37
3. Gen 9:18-27; Acts 17:26-27; Rom 12:1-21; 1 Cor 14:6-12; Gal 3:23-29; Phil 3:7-21

Primary Readings: Martin Luther King, Jr.:

1. "[I Have a Dream](#)"
2. "[I've Been to the Mountaintop](#)"
3. "[Paul's Letter to American Christians](#)"

Video: [Eyes on the Prize](#) (pts. II, V)

1/21: Suffering and Liberation

Secondary Readings: Reinhartz, "*Magnolia* and the Plague of Frogs"

Biblical Readings: Ex 5:1-12:50

Film: *Magnolia*

1/22: Sin and the Spiritual Journey

Secondary Readings: Tackach, "[The Biblical Foundations of James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues'](#)"

Biblical Readings: Gen 4:1-16; Isa 51:17-23; Lk 15:11-32

Primary Readings: Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues"

Video: [Jazz](#) (pt. VIII)

1/23: Sin and Salvation

Secondary Readings: Reinhartz, "The Shawshank Redemption and the Salvation that Lies Within"

Biblical Readings: Rom 5:1-5; 8:18-25; 1 Cor 13:1-13

Film: *The Shawshank Redemption*