

The Meaning of Life: Moral and Spiritual Inquiry Through Literature

Sophomore College 2005

September 6th-23rd

Weekdays 10am-12pm

Wallenberg Hall, 160-314

Instructor:

Scotty McLennan

Dean for Religious Life

Memorial Church, Stanford University

mclennan@stanford.edu

(650) 723-1762

SoCoAssistants:

Raena Saddler

rsaddler@stanford.edu

(720) 937-3654

Jesse Klausz

jklausz@stanford.edu

(917) 553-5956

Course Description:

Short novels and plays will provide the basis for reflection on ethical values and the purpose of life. Some of the works to be studied are F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, and Flannery O'Connor's *The Displaced Person*. We will read for plot, setting, character, and theme using a two-text method-looking both at the narrative of the literary work and at students' own lives-rather than either deconstructing the literature or relating it to the author's biography and psychology. The kinds of questions we will ask have many answers: Why are we here? How do we find meaningful work? What can death teach us about life? What is the meaning of success? What is the nature of true love? How can one find balance between work and personal life? How free are we to seek our own destiny? What obligations do we have to others? Half of the literature examined will be set in America, and the rest in other countries around the world. Both secular and religious world views from a variety of traditions will be considered. The authors chosen are able to hold people up as jewels to the light, turning them around to show all of their facets, both blemished and pure, while at the same time pointing to any internal glow beneath the surface. Classes will be taught in a Socratic, discussion-based style. Study questions will accompany each reading and provide a foundation for class discussion. Grading will be based 50% on class participation, 25% on one-page reflection papers on reading assignments, and 25% on a 4-page final paper due on September 21st.

Course Films:

The following films based on readings are required for class, and will be screened together at scheduled times:

Death of a Salesman

Of Mice and Men

Enemy of the People

Displaced Person

Course Readings (in the order in which they will be discussed):

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*
Jane Smiley, *Goodwill, Ordinary Love*
Henrik Ibsen (as adapted by Arthur Miller), *An Enemy of the People*
Herman Hesse, *Siddhartha*
John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*
Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine*
Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*
Flannery O' Connor, *Displaced Person, A Good Man is Hard to Find*
Albert Camus, *The Stranger*
Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

Course Requirements:

1) Regular Class Participation

Classes will generally be conducted in a Socratic discussion-based style, requiring *active participation of all students in each session*. Everyone must read the assigned texts critically and carefully, consider daily discussion questions, and come to class prepared to participate in and contribute to class periods. (Study questions are only thought prompts and *possible* leading questions for your daily response papers—but no written response is required.) Also see the calendar and attached activities sheet.

2) Daily Response Paper

For each class except September 6th (for the first class meeting on the *Great Gatsby*), you are responsible for writing a one page, double-spaced response paper (about 250 words) discussing and raising questions about the readings. These papers are to be thoughtful reflections on the readings, and are informal. You can (for example) use these papers to give personal reactions to the readings and films, synthesize and compare sources, or to raise questions to discuss in class.

Daily response papers are due via email by 8:00am each morning before a class meeting. For any reason, you may miss **one** response paper without explanation or penalty. Send papers to Scotty as well as *both* SCA's: (mclennan@stanford.edu, rsaddler@stanford.edu, jklausz@stanford.edu)

3) Final Paper and Presentation

A four-page final paper will be due Wednesday, September 21st at 5:00pm. Thursday and Friday (the 22nd and 23rd) will be spent presenting your reflections from throughout the course to the class. More specifics on the final paper and presentations will be provided in class.

Grading Basis: 50%--Class Participation, 25%--Reflection Papers, 25%--Final Paper and Presentation

Class Sessions and Study Questions:

Tuesday, Sept. 6: *Great Gatsby*

- 1) What's so great about Gatsby? Does he have any integrity?
- 2) What are Gatsby's, Daisy's, and Nick's life goals? What is each living for?
- 3) How does this book help you to understand the American Dream, and is this same American Dream still alive today?
- 4) Who is the "hero" of the book? Or is *anyone* to be admired?

Wednesday, Sept. 7: *Goodwill, Ordinary Love*

- 1) Does this book confirm that money/greed/desire are the source of all evil? (*Goodwill*)
- 2) Where is there good? Does it reside in children (Tommy and Annabel)? Does evil? Are children just innocent or instinctual, not good or evil? Do you think children are innately evil? (*Goodwill*)
- 3) Where does love go wrong in "Ordinary Love"?
- 4) Where does love go right? (*Ordinary Love*)

Thursday, Sept. 8: *An Enemy of the People*

- 1) What kind of religious world view—what view of human nature and ultimate reality—lies behind Dr. Stockmann's actions?
- 2) Is Dr. Stockmann an example of morality run amok? Does he need to be more practical and compromising?
- 3) How true to human nature, as you know it, do the actions of the following seem: Mrs. Stockmann, Peter Stockmann, Petra Stockmann, and participants in the public meeting?
- 4) What motivates the three people representing the press in this play: Hovstad, Billing, and Aslaksen?

Friday, Sept. 9: *Siddhartha*

(Please note that the character Siddhartha in this novel is not the same person as the historical Buddha, who is also often called Siddhartha. The historical Buddha does appear in Hesse's novel, but there he is called "Gotama.")

- 1) Can one be good without God? Without a spiritual tradition? Without a human role model?
- 2) Could Siddhartha ever really have been successful in business when "Kamaswami conducted his business with care and often with passion, but Siddhartha regarded it as a game, the rules of which he endeavored to learn well, but which did not stir his heart" (p.66)
- 3) Is there such a thing as personal enlightenment? If so, could Siddhartha have attained this in another way?
- 4) What is the relationship, if any, between personal enlightenment and business success?

Monday, Sept. 12: *Of Mice and Men*

- 1) Does George really want the American dream, or the independence of being free of Lenny?
- 2) Isn't Slim the real hero of the novel—as successful doer rather than deluded dreamer?
- 3) Realistically, shouldn't Lenny have been locked up in a mental hospital at the start of the story? Is Lenny to be held responsible for his actions, or is George to be held responsible for Lenny's actions?
- 4) How much of the "evil" perpetrated in this book can be traced to discrimination—based on age, disability, race, gender, class?

Tuesday, Sept. 13: *Jasmine*

- 1) Are both worldviews—Indian and American—reflected in Jasmine's thoughts and actions, or does one predominate?
- 2) To what extent is Jasmine, or *anyone* for that matter, in control of his/her destiny?
- 3) Jasmine says of herself and Du, "We've been many selves" (p. 214). Is there a stable core self that each of us have, or are we really different people over time?
- 4) Does Jasmine take responsibility for her actions? Is Jasmine moral?

Wednesday, Sept. 14: *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

- 1) What moral and spiritual issues does Ivan Ilyich face?
- 2) What's the meaning of "professionalism" for Ivan Ilyich? For you?

- 3) How can one be sure that one's life is "real"?
- 4) Does it matter how one faces death?

Thursday, Sept. 15: *A Good Man is Hard to Find, Displaced Person*

- 1) What is a "good man"? (*A Good Man is Hard to Find*)
- 2) What did the Misfit mean when at the end of the story he said about the grandmother, "She would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life"? (p. 29)
- 3) How does this story help you understand what kind of character one needs for an adequate moral response to social conditions of poverty and racism? (*Displaced Person*)
- 4) What do you think of these aphorisms of Mrs. McIntyre's?
"One fellow's misery is the other fellow's gain."
"The devil you know is better than the devil you don't."
"The world's getting so full of people that only the smart, thrifty, energetic ones are going to survive."
"My obligation is to the people who've done something for their country, not to the ones who've just come over to take advantage of what they can get."

Friday, Sept. 16: *The Stranger*

- 1) What makes life worth living for the narrator and main character, Meursault? In what ways do you identify with him?
- 2) What do you think of Meursault's generally apathetic attitude towards life? Is his stoicism any respectable way to live? Why or why not?
- 3) Did Meursault have any dreams? Any spirituality? Any morality?
- 4) Given Meursault's worldview, why should he be honest?

Monday, Sept. 19: *Death of a Salesman*

- 1) Is Willy Loman ultimately a hero? A passive victim of social circumstances? Or an active victim of his own lack of integrity, self-knowledge, or ability to relate to others?
- 2) To what extent is Biff a failure? A success? A product of his father's parenting? Why?
- 3) What, if any, is Linda's responsibility for the life circumstances of her husband and children?
- 4) When does salesmanship—"living on a smile and a shoeshine"—cross over to living a lie?

Tuesday, Sept. 20: DAY OFF! (no class)

Wednesday, Sept. 21: FINAL PAPER DUE, 5:00pm (no class)

Thursday, Sept. 22: Final Presentations in class

Friday, Sept. 23: Final Presentations in class