The Literatures of Hope and Despair
FRSEM-UA 642
Spring 2017
New York University
Prof. Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

Wednesday: 2:00-4:30 pm
Office Hours: Wednesday 11-12:30 and by appointment

Course Description: Humans have long shaped narratives regarding the long arc of human history. Some have put forth narratives of progress, others tell a story of our inexorable decline, while still others see a cyclical pattern to human history. Underlying these contrasting narratives are deep disagreements regarding such issues as the moral character of human nature and the role of rationality. We will be exploring these contrasting narratives, with an eye to trying to answer the question of whether our best days are ahead of us or behind us (and whether we can possibly make a difference in the story). Our readings will come from philosophers (including Spinoza, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche) as well as novelists (including George Elliot, Goethe, Herman Melville, Dostoevsky, I.B. Singer, Cormac McCarthy).

ASSESSMENT

- 10%: Attendance, class participation
This is a seminar class. Coming prepared to class and active participation in discussion are essential components of the course. Please learn your classmate’s names and treat the classroom as a space for respectful, cheerful, collective engagement.
• **30%: (Almost) Weekly discussion posts**
These will be 1-3 paragraphs in which you formulate a well-thought-out question or reflection about the texts and post them on NYU Class. I will post my response to your posting, and all others in the seminar are invited (though not required) to respond as well. You are allowed to skip one weekly post.

• **30%: 3 short papers – 3-4 pp.**
These short papers are your opportunity to show you can read and analyze a text closely for argument, mode, logic, style, and figurative language. They are not research papers but rather meant to show reflection on the texts.

• **30%: Final paper – 10-12 pp**
This is an in-depth analysis paper that may build on one of your short assignments. It may go beyond the scope of the class, but must include at least two readings from the syllabus and be substantively related in theme and analysis to the issues we’ve discussed in the seminar. I encourage you to schedule a conference with me to discuss your final paper topic.

**COURSE POLICIES**

**Assignments**
Detailed assignment instructions will be distributed in class and made available on NYU Classes. If you are away the day it is distributed, please access it online. You are encouraged to read the assignment closely and ask for clarification early. Assignments are due *printed and stapled on* the days indicated on the syllabus (double-spaced, 12-pt font, Times New Roman or Cambria). Handing in assignments late prevents your instructor from giving your work timely attention and feedback; please be respectful of our work schedules and hand them in on time. *Late assignments will be penalized 5% per day.* Although I will give you feedback on each submitted piece and am happy to discuss it with you, it is my firm policy not to change grades after they are determined.

**Attendance**
*More than two absences* will severely jeopardize your ability to pass the class. Please communicate as early as you can with the professor regarding any absences. Late arrivals are disruptive to the professor and your fellow classmates; two late arrivals will count as one absence.

**Electronics**
This class is an opportunity for you to be “unplugged”, allowing you the space to do careful and focused reading and thinking. Due to increasing evidence of the false ability to “multitask”, no electronic devices are permitted in lecture or recitation. These include laptops, cell phones, iPhones, iPads, blackberries, kindles etc. Please be respectful of your classmates and teachers and *turn them off* on entering the classroom. Bring print copies of all readings to class.

**NYU Classes Website**
Assignment details and course readings (as pdfs) will be posted on the NYU Classes site. I will also post reading and discussion questions there.

**Communication**
For questions about course content, assignments, assessment and special situations, the best thing to do is stop by my office hours and speak to me in person. If emailing, I will try my best to respond within 24-48 hours.

**Disabilities**
Students with disabilities should register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (mosescsd@nyu.edu; 726 Broadway, 2nd Floor; tel. 212.998.4980), which can arrange for things like extra time for assignments. I must also be notified at the beginning of semester for special
accommodations regarding assessment and assignments.

**The Writing Center**
You are encouraged to use the resources of NYU’s Writing Center, where tutors can give you one-on-one help with your written assignments.
http://ewp.cas.nyu.edu/object/writing.center

**Academic Integrity**
See NYU’s full statement on academic integrity: http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity. Any instance of academic dishonesty will result in an F and will be reported to the relevant dean for disciplinary action. Remember that plagiarism is a matter of fact, not intention. Know what it is, and don’t do it.

**Required Texts:**

2. *The Essential Schopenhauer: Key Selections from The World as Will and Representation and Other Writings*, by Arthur Schopenhauer, edited by Wolfgang Schirmacher, Harper Perennial Modern Classics
5. *Notes from the Underground*, by Fyodor Dostoevsky, with an introduction by Richard Pevear, Vintage Classics

It is helpful if we are all reading the same editions, so that we can easily find passages while discussing. The books will be available at the NYU Bookstore.

**Additional readings**—stories and essays—to be distributed in class and posted online:

- “Progress”
- “Now Is The Best Time To Be Alive,” by Barack Obama
- “What Is The Enlightenment?” by Immanuel Kant
- “A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History,” by Hegel
- “Bartleby The Scrivener,” by Hermann Melville
- “The Spinoza of Market Street,” by I.B. Singer

**READING SCHEDULE AND WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

**Week 1**: January 26 Organization, General themes:
Assignment: Watch The Munk Debate: Progress
https://www.munkdebates.com/debates/progress
Weekly blog post, 1-3 paragraphs: Post your reaction to the debates. What was your initial (pre-Munk-debate) opinion on the question of whether our best days lie before or behind us? Did you have your opinion changed at all? Whose position most represented your own intuition before the debate? Which argument particularly resonated with you? Were there points that you thought were ignored that could have made one side or the other stronger? Your posting must be up by the next class, February 1, 2:00 pm.
https://www.wired.com/2016/10/president-obama-guest-edits-wired-essay/
**Week 2:** February 1. The Hope of Reason:

We will be discussing Spinoza's *Ethics* all of this week and the next.

Reading Assignment: *A Spinoza Reader*, pp. 85-114 (pay special attention to the Appendix at end of Part I) and pp. 152-159.

No blog posting this week.

**Week 3:** February 8. We continue discussing Spinoza’s *Ethics*

Reading Assignment: *A Spinoza Reader*: pp. 197-265.

Supplementary Reading: All the rest of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. I highly recommend it!

Your weekly blog posting, which must be posted by Feb.8, can be on any part of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Pose a question, and I will post a response. Make sure your question is closely tied to the reading.

**Week 4** February 15: We will be discussing how Spinoza’s *Ethics* fed into the intellectual and cultural movement that became the Enlightenment.

Reading: “What Is the Enlightenment?” by Immanuel Kant  
https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/What_is_Enlightenment.pdf

“A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History,” by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel  
https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hi/introduction.htm

First short paper assignment: due in class February 22: Topic: Compare Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel on How Possible/Likely/Inevitable They Believed Human Progress To Be.

**Week 5:** February 22. No Reason To Hope:

This week we will be discussing Schopenhauer’s philosophical pessimism.

Reading: *The Essential Schopenhauer*, pp 1-38; pp. 97-102; 209-232

Weekly blog post

**Week 6:** March 1. The Extraordinary Individual

This week we will be discussing Schopenhauer’s influence on Nietzsche and Nietzsche’s influence on the Counter-Enlightenment.

Reading: *The Untimely Meditations*, by Friedrich Nietzsche pp. 134-172

No blog posting this week.

Second short paper due on March 8. A Debate: Resolved: Our Best Days Are Ahead of Us.” Rewrite the Munk dialogue only with either Spinoza, Kant or Hegel speaking in favor of the resolution and either Schopenhauer or Nietzsche speaking against it. Or you might have two against two, as in the Munk Debate; your choice.

**Week 7:** March 8. We begin George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*,

Readings: Prelude through end of Book Two. pp. 3-226.

No blog post

Spring Break!


No blog post

**Week 9:** March 29, We finish our reading of *Middlemarch*

No blog post

**Week 10:** April 5

Readings: Goethe’s *Urfaust* and “Bartleby The Scrivener,” by Hermann Melville.

Supplementary reading, “The Spinoza of Market Street,” by I.B. Singer

Weekly blog post
Week 11: April 12, Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*

Third short paper assignment: Was Plato Right to Banish the Poets? Pick one philosopher we've read and one novelist, and compare and contrast how they go about persuading us. The paper should be emailed to me by April 19th.

Week 12: April 19, Class cancelled. We will find an alternate time
Reading: Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, pp.3-193
No weekly blog post

Week 13: April 26, Finish reading *Blood Meridian*
Weekly blog post

Week 14: May 3. Last class: General discussion. Final paper due: May 10th.