

GENERAL EDUCATION COURSE PROPOSAL
UNIVERSITY OF MARY WASHINGTON

Use this form to submit **EXISTING** courses for review. If this course will be submitted for review in more than one category, submit a separate proposal for each category.

COURSE NUMBER:	FSEM 100xx		
COURSE TITLE:	ETHICS AND LITERATURE		
SUBMITTED BY:	Mara Scanlon	DATE:	1-29-08
<i>This course proposal is submitted with the department's approval. (Put a check in the box to the right.)</i>			X
<i>If part of a science sequence involving two departments, both departments approve.</i>			

THIS COURSE IS PROPOSED FOR (check one).

First-Year Seminar <i>(indicate in the rationale if this will also count for major credit)</i>	X
Quantitative Reasoning	
Global Inquiry	
Human Experience and Society	
Experiential Learning	
Arts, Literature, and Performance: Process	or
	Appreciation
Natural Science <i>(include both parts of the sequence)</i>	

NOTE: See the report entitled "General Education Curriculum as Approved by the Faculty Senate," dated November 7, 2007, for details about the general education categories and the criteria that will be used to evaluate courses proposed. The report is available at www.jtmorello.org/gened.

RATIONALE: Using only the space provided in the box below, **briefly** state why this course should be approved as a general education course in the category specified above. *Attach a course syllabus.* **Submit this form and attached syllabus electronically as one document to John Morello (jmorello@umw.edu).** All submissions **must** be in electronic form.

The new FSEM on Ethics and Literature that I propose here offers a challenging, interdisciplinary course of study in which students will read primary texts of both literature and theory/philosophy/criticism. I believe it meets all of the criteria for the FSEM. The class sessions will be run nearly entirely as discussions, sometimes following student-generated discussion prompts. The course has a library research component for its 8-10 page paper project, which also includes several constitutive assignments (annotated bibliography, proposal, drafting and workshop review, semi-formal oral presentation of argument). In addition, the course work includes several other kinds of writing: two critical reviews, an essay exam, and multiple low-stakes writing opportunities that I anticipate will incorporate both creative and analytical prompts. The FSEM goal of developing critical thinking and giving students occasions to synthesize readings and enter into dialogue with those readings is addressed in multiple ways in the class assignments, but truly I see it as daily work, especially as the questions of ethical engagement demand individual choices and commitments. FSEMs in ELS do not count for major credit.

FSEM 100xx
First-Year Seminar on Ethics and Literature

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and by appointment

Fall 2008
12:30 TR
Combs xxx

Course Description

The course title “Ethics and Literature” hinges on a word whose meaning in this context is not entirely clear—and you may be surprised that it is the word “and.” What does it mean to talk about literature in the company of ethical models, questions, and theories? What happens to each of the elements that teeters on either side of the word “and” when it is placed in dialogue with the other by that conjunction? Do we mean ethics *in* literature, the reading of literary works to unlock some moral code, the weighing of a literary work to see whether or not it articulates some acceptable social or personal value? This is the way that “ethics and literature” plays out in our school libraries, our popular press, and even our courtrooms (as well as in some serious literary scholarship). Do we also mean ethics *of* literature, the idea that the author bears some ethical responsibilities toward his or her subject matter, that representation in art is a tricky matter indeed, requiring ethical choices of theme and form? In fact, forms themselves may be judged more or less ethical by critics, and the reader’s engagement with and response to the text are also theorized ethically. We might even mean ethics *through* literature, such as in literature of witness or in ecocriticism’s insistent connection between literature and the natural world’s bounty and fragility. In the midst of all this, it is vital as well to ask, but what about beauty?

In this class we’ll think about these and other topics, positioning our own voices in the vibrant critical discussions about ethics and literature. We will read works by many of the leading theorists in the field and will also read several works of literature, applying and developing the theoretical models we study. Through all of this, we will keep before us the questions, what is literature for? May it help us to live well in a suffering, complicated world? When an author writes, what is his or her obligation to the subject matter, the language, the readers who will eventually receive that text? When we read, what is our obligation to the text, the author’s utterance, and/or the world we re-encounter after our reading?

Required Texts

Davis, Todd F. and Kenneth Womack, eds. *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*
Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl and Other Poems*
Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*
Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*
O’Connor, Flannery. *The Complete Stories*
Wiesel, Elie. *Night*

Selected essays and excerpts, including:

Mikhail Bakhtin, excerpts from *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and "Art and Answerability"

Lawrence Buell, Introduction to *PMLA* special edition: "In Pursuit of Ethics"

Barbara Foley, "Fact, Fiction, Fascism: Testimony and Mimesis in Holocaust Narratives"

D. J. Myers, "Responsible for Every Single Pain: Holocaust Literature and the Ethics of Interpretation"

Elizabeth D. Samet, excerpts from *Soldier's Heart: Reading Literature through Peace and War at West Point*

Elaine Scarry, excerpts from *On Beauty and Being Just*

William Waters, "Poetic Address and Intimate Reading: The Offered Hand"

Course Requirements

Assigned Readings: This course has a demanding and constant reading load, often from very challenging texts. You should have completed assigned readings before class and should bring the necessary books to each meeting. "Completing" the reading does not mean simply skimming your eyes over an assigned number of pages; it means beginning the process of critical engagement with the ideas in those pages, even if you only feel prepared to formulate a few sophisticated questions.

Class Participation (20%): This course asks you to respond thoughtfully in several ways to our readings as we progress through the semester. A primary way is through discussion, which will be our principal format for class meetings. Active participation during daily class discussions is essential to doing well in this course; participation will be assessed for both frequency and quality. You needn't be an "expert" to participate. Remember that asking a good question is as or sometimes more valuable than offering a completed thought. Some of the works we read may raise strong responses; I should not need to say that I expect respect and civility even in disagreement. *I don't want you to think about class discussion chiefly as a time to impress me; this seminar's success depends on our commitment to one another as a community of collaborative learners, and being willing to take risks and able to listen are essential for this dialogue to flourish.*

Oral participation naturally is not possible if you are not present for the class meeting; therefore, attendance is a must. Excessive absences may significantly lower this portion of the grade. Chronically tardy arrivals are not acceptable. It is your responsibility to find out what you have missed when you are absent.

Short Writing (20%): Five times in the course of the semester I will ask you to complete a short piece of writing (probably about 500 words) in response to a prompt. This writing is likely to offer prompts that are both creative and analytical and that, in either case, are designed to help you focus closely and productively on essential passages or issues of our readings and on ethical decisions inherent in the production and consumption of literature. Because each piece of writing counts for only 4% of your final grade, it is a low-stakes assignment, and one in which you should feel free to take risks and stretch your comfort zone (and maybe even have fun).

A few nuts and bolts:

- Grading for the short writing will consist of a system of symbols with the following criteria:
 - + Unusually sophisticated, surprising, or thought-provoking response to the prompt; writing is graceful, organized, and clear
 - ✓ + More creative or original than the norm, shows depth of thinking; writing is organized and clear
 - ✓ Adequate response to the topic with solid writing
 - ✓ - Writing problems or inadequate depth to analysis
 - Missed the point of the writing prompt
- Grading for the semester will be based on a curve—i.e., the highest total among the actual earned grades will be an A+.

Critical Reviews and Expert Guidance (10% x 2 = 20%): Some of the pieces we will read this semester are difficult, with abstract or dense language and very knotty ideas. Sometimes it may seem like enough just to figure out what something means. But as you emerge in college as more sophisticated critical thinkers, you will need to move beyond simply comprehending things to engaging with them deeply—assessing their worth, interrogating their assumptions and conclusions, grappling with their implications. Twice this semester (date to be determined by signup early in the semester) you will take leadership on an assigned reading. This leadership will have two manifestations. First, you will write a critical review of the reading (about 500-750 words). Part of the review is a summary or abstract: what is the reading's thesis and main developmental arguments? This should take no more than half your space. In the rest of the space, you will venture the kind of critical reading I describe above, responding to the reading rather than summarizing it. Secondly, you will use your expertise on the reading to help guide our discussion for that class. On a separate page, you will append to your critical review two discussion questions designed to spur active, meaningful discussion in our seminar meeting. As I have suggested above, the ability to ask such questions is in itself a sophisticated response, requiring an interrogation of the text that identifies what may be fruitfully probed without, perhaps, ever being finally settled. During class on the day you submit your review, we will draw on these questions and I and your classmates may turn to you for expert guidance in our work with the reading.

Research Paper (25%): For this assignment, which will culminate in a paper of 8-10 pages, you will gain familiarity with the methods of appropriate scholarly research, a task in which we will be aided by UMW's Humanities Librarian/Superhero Jack Bales; the paper will require at least four sophisticated sources. The purpose of this research is (at least) two-fold: to add depth, richness, and possibly accuracy to your discussion by drawing in professional voices, and to give you practice then entering into conversation with those voices, since your charge here is not to report others' ideas but rather to advance your own ideas in the midst of an ongoing dialogue. To receive full credit, each project will include completion of other required steps:

- An annotated working bibliography of at least three sources
- A semi-formal proposal for your project
- Submission of two drafts for my feedback and guided peer response in writing workshops
- A semi-formal oral presentation of your project to the seminar

A few examples of the larger fields in which we may begin narrowing topics are ecocriticism; the ethics of memoir or self-representation (including specific instances such as James Frey or Rigoberta Menchu); suppression of literature (banned books in schools, communities, or nations, obscenity trials, etc.); or ethics and genre.

Final Exam (15%): This exam, which will be primarily essay-based, will be comprehensive and will test your ability to synthesize the course material.

A few reminders

Grades of B and A are reserved for work that is distinctly above average or excellent.

A note on academic misconduct: Plagiarism, like all cheating, is a serious offense. It means presenting another person's work as your own--whether that person is a friend, writing center or speaking center tutor, professional, or published author. Copying passages or paraphrasing ideas belonging to another person without acknowledging the source of those ideas is plagiarism. You can avoid this offense if you simply cite and reference the source you use, if any. I am quite willing to help you understand strategies for quotation and citation but I am not willing to be lenient on plagiarism, so please consult with me if you need to. **I expect that you will adhere at all times to the Honor code of the University of Mary Washington.**

Disability services: The Office of Disability Services has been designated by the University as the primary office to guide, counsel, and assist students with disabilities. If you receive services through the Office of Disability Services and require accommodations for this class, make an appointment with me as soon as possible to discuss confidentially your approved accommodation needs (and bring your accommodation letter with you to the appointment) so that I am able to support you in making this class as successful as possible. If you have not made contact with the Office of Disability Services and believe you need accommodations, their phone number is 540-654-1266.