

ENGL 280—Literature and Society

“What’s Aught But As Tis Valued?”
Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*

Catalog Description:

Fiction, poetry, drama and other cultural texts engaged with questions of values, ethics and social responsibility.

Troilus’s question makes explicit the problem of value in the play and more generally—what are the standards? how do we decide? are values arbitrary? Much of the play is concerned with these questions, and so are the works on our reading list for this course.

Literature has long served as a resource for considerations about value. Poems, plays, novels, and films all present imagined worlds whose social norms and ethical standards can be considered by audiences. Literary texts often present models for behavior as well as cautions about actions to avoid. The role of literature in teaching ethics has been a theme of literary criticism since at least classical Greece and looms large in contemporary arguments for the value of the humanities.

In this course, students will read and discuss literary texts from a variety of periods and national traditions that illuminate the values that guide human interactions. The readings will afford students opportunities to identify the guiding principles of the texts, to ask questions about why characters either do or do not follow the principles of the fictional world they inhabit, and to consider how these representations relate to real practices in the contemporary world.

We begin with Sir Philip Sidney’s *Apology for Poesy*, a text that takes up the artistic and ethical obligations of the poet, as a way to frame our discussions of the ways that literary texts represent disparate models of ethics. We will assess and test Sidney’s argument that the poetry does a better job at teaching than other kinds of writing.

From there we will move through two classical Greek dramas whose central conflicts derive from ethical issues. Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* depicts a central character whose tragedy derives, in part, from a failure

OUTCOMES

At the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Identify the source and function of values in a range of literary texts through textual analysis and close reading.
2. Understand the importance of literature in the expression and evaluation of values.
3. Demonstrate an understanding of the importance of values, ethics, and social responsibility for the self and for contemporary society by writing effective analytical essays about literature.
4. Reflect on how values shape personal and community ethics and decision-making.
5. Competently discuss the role of literature in the representation and exploration of values.

Carolina Core Outcome:

AIU - Students will be able to create or interpret literary, visual or performing arts.

VSR - Students will be able to examine different kinds of social and personal values, analyzing the ways in which these are manifested in communities as well as individual lives.

Course Requirements:

Grading will be based on the following criteria:

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| Paper #1—4-6 pages | 25% |
| Paper #2—4-6 pages | 25% |
| Response | 15% |
| Final Exam | 25% |
| Participation | 10% |

The papers will ask students to examine the ethics and values represented in one (or more) of the texts on the syllabus, examining such questions as how the play or novel represents justice, the judgment of value, the best life, how to respond to obligation, etc. Prompts will require students to address how ethical judgments are made the text and how the represented ethical values relate to their own. Students will be expected to engage with the details of the text and to reflect on how the values embedded in the text either do or do not have resonance for us today.

I will distribute a sheet of grading standards for your papers with the first paper topics. Papers must be submitted in print and through SafeAssignment—details on this will appear with the first set of topics.

The response paper is a brief reaction to a specific represented question about values and ethical behavior in one text on the syllabus.

Due dates are firm—no extensions will be granted under ordinary circumstances—and late papers lose one full grade for every day they are late.

General Policies/Housekeeping

1. Be on time. Tardy arrivals disrupt everyone's learning. Persistent tardiness and/or absence will have a negative effect on your final grade—should you miss more than 3 classes without a valid excuse your grade will be lowered by one step (A to B+) and another step for each three after that.
2. Be prepared to discuss the day's reading on the day it is assigned.
3. Please do not bring any food or drink into the classroom.
4. Turn off all cell phones, pagers, and other wireless devices.

A Note on Plagiarism

Plagiarism is defined as the representation of another person's work as your own, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and is one of the gravest of academic offenses. Most of the time, plagiarism is inadvertent—failing to cite properly, for example—and can be avoided by due attention to matters of documentation. If you have **any** questions about documentation, please ask me. Ignorance is no excuse, and I am more than happy to answer any question about citations. Plagiarism will be punished by failure in the course must be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity which imposes additional sanctions ranging from a warning up to suspension and beyond.

Accommodations:

Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. If you have a disability and may need accommodations to fully participate in this class, contact the Office of Student Disability Services: 777-6142, TDD 7776744, email sasds@mailbox.sc.edu, or stop by LeConte College Room 112A. All accommodations must be approved through the Office of Student Disability Services.

READING LIST

Sir Philip Sidney, *Apology for Poetry*
Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*
Marlowe, *Dr Faustus*
Shakespeare, *Hamlet*
Troilus and Cressida

Milton, *Paradise Lost*
Dickens, *Great Expectations*
Banks, *Player of Games*

SCHEDULE

WEEK 1—Introductions/Sidney

WEEK 2—Sidney/Sophocles

WEEK 3—Marlowe

WEEK 4—Marlowe

WEEK 5—Shakespeare (*Hamlet*)

WEEK 6—Shakespeare (*Hamlet*)
Paper One Due

WEEK 7—Shakespeare (*Troilus and Cressida*)

WEEK 8—Shakespeare (*Troilus and Cressida*)

WEEK 9—Milton

WEEK 10—Milton

WEEK 11—Dickens

WEEK 12—Dickens
Paper Two Due

WEEK 13—Banks

WEEK 14—Banks
Response Due

WEEK 15—Summation