

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
GALLATIN
School of Individualized Study
FATE AND FREE WILL IN THE EPIC TRADITION

K20.1116 (4 credits)
Spring 2008
Monday 6:20-9:00

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Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have we created thee, so that thou mightest be free according to thy own will and honor, to be thy own creator and builder. To thee alone we gave growth and development depending on thy own free will. Thou bearest in thee the germs of a universal life.

(Pico della Mirandola, *Oratio de Hominis Dignitate*)

In the world of nature everything is subject to a causal law, or rather every event has in itself a cause. If this is true, then every event that happens is preordained. Likewise any event that does not happen was not meant to happen. The principle of determinism often considered to be most comprehensive of all the laws of nature, also appears frequently as a causative factor in many fields of research. The dominant school of Quantum physics maintains that the ultimate laws of nature are not causally deterministic but assert only the statistical probability of occurrences at a subatomic level. If human actions are determined in this way then it follows that no one could ever have acted otherwise than he did, and therefore no one is morally responsible for his/her actions. From the beginning of his/her existence man/woman is confronted with the choice between different courses of action, unlike the animal who is completely subjected to an automatic chain of reactions starting with the stimulus (hunger) and ending with a strictly determined course of action. Instead of a predetermined course of action, man/woman has to weigh possible courses of action in his mind; that is, he/she starts to think. Ultimately he/she tries to transcend nature and the tragic fate of death.

This class on Fate and Free Will in the epic tradition is designed to make the student recognize the central issues and ideas that comprised the classical Western canon of Epics from *Gilgamesh* to James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Literature essentially embedded in the realms of metaphysics and society sometimes becomes indelible by its transformation of pure thought into a pattern of human behavior. This class will likewise explore those metaphoric patterns coming out of the chief literary achievements of Western Epics that greatly inspired and served as a guide to subsequent writers and thinkers in the Western World, and consequently became the norms and mores of modern society.

Structuralist and deconstructionist literary criticism will be adopted for the interpretation of some of the works in this course. Eventually this will develop and refine students' analytical and critical thinking skills of literary works. Finally, the student will gain technical competence in recognizing genres, decorum and dominant literary tropes of the Ancient and Modern European period and of literature in general.

LECTURES

- Jan. 28: **Introduction**
- Feb. 4: **CHALLENGING BIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM**
The Epic of Gilgamesh
- Feb. 11: **THE INVENTION OF REASON**
The Iliad (i-xii)
- Feb. 18: **NO CLASS**
- Feb. 25: **DETERMINISM & FREE WILL**
The Iliad (xiii-xxiv)
- Mar. 3: **BEYOND SEX**
The Aeneid (i-iii)
- Mar. 10: **MASTERING THE SELF**
The Aeneid (iv-vi)
- Mar. 17: **NO CLASS**
- Mar. 24: **THE LIMITATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE**
The Consolation of Philosophy (I-iii)(paper)
- Mar. 31: **UNDERSTANDING TO UNDERSTAND**
The Consolation of Philosophy (iv-v)
- Apr. 7: **THE DIVINE COMEDY Fact or Fiction?**
Inferno (1-11)
- *Apr. 12: **TRIP TO THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM**
(Meet at 4pm in front of the Museum)
- Apr. 14: **POLITICS IN HELL**
Inferno (12-22)
- *Apr. 21: **NO CLASS: READING IMPROVIZATION OF *INFERNO***
(Date and Place to be announced)
- Apr. 28: **FATE & FREE WILL: THE EDUCATION OF DESIRE**
Inferno (23-34)
- May 5: **TRIAL/EPIC (Place to be announced in class)**

REQUIRED TEXT BOOKS:

- Gilgamesh* (trans., Stephen Mitchell, Free Press: 2004).
Homer, *The Iliad* (trans. R.Fagles).
Vergil, *Aeneid* (trans., R. Fitzgerald, Vintage Books: 1984).
Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Penguin Classics: 1969).
Dante, *Inferno*

***Reading is due each week before your section meets.**

RECOMMENDED TEXTS:

Plato, *Protagoras* (Penguin Classics: 1986).
Aristotle, *Ethics* (Penguin Classics: 1983).
Cicero, *De Fato* (Harvard University Press: 1957).
Luther and Erasmus, *Discourse on Free Will*
Homer, *Odyssey* (trans., R. Fitzgerald).
Joyce, *Ulysses*
Tasso, *Jerusalem Delivered*
Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (Avon: 1969).
Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Mentor Classics: 1961).

CINEMATIC RECREATIONS:

Dangerous Beauty
Brother Sun, Sister Moon

AUDITORY RECREATIONS:

Bach, *Ich habe genug*
Carl Orf, *Carmina Burana*.
Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, *Stabat Mater*.
Ottorino Respighi, *Ancient Airs*.
Rameau: *Dido's Lament*

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The grade in the course will be based on an examination, a research paper, a trial, writing a mini-epic, a reading of Dante's *Inferno*, three quizzes, and class attendance/participation. **There will be a grade penalty for coming in late and for late-papers.**

1. **EXAMINATION:** will be a take-home short essay exam (is due on February 25th. [15 pts.]
2. **PAPER:** Trace the theme of Fate and Free Will in the first three books that we have read in this course (due on March 23rd). Papers should be typed, double-spaced, between six and eight pages long. Footnotes or endnotes may be in any accepted style (MLA, Chicago Manual, Turabian, APA) provided it is used consistently and correctly. [20 pts.]
3. **READING OF DANTE'S *INFERNO* (10 pts)**

4. **EPIC:** Write a six to eight pages long mini-epic (Due May 5th). Details will be given in class.

The following are possible characters to be assigned: Gilgamesh, Enkidu, Ishtar, the Bull of fire, En lil, Helen, Hector, Achilles, Penelope, Agamemnon, Zeus, Paris, Homer, Ulysses, Ajax, Apollo, Athena, Hera, Aeneas, Dido, Bellona, Aeolus, Tiresias, Boethius, Lady Philosophy, Fortuna, Reification, Noumena, Judith, Aristotle, St. Paul, St. Augustine, Plato, Lucretius, Roland, Britomartis, Wife of Bath, Cid Campeador, Dante, Paolo, Francesca, Beatrice, Count Ugolino, Milton, Michael, Metraton, Lucifer, Adam, Eve, God, Fate, and Free Will. [15 pts]

5. **TRIAL:** On My 5th students will impersonate and defend their mini-epic hero/heroine/theme in a mock trial (following the guideline of Oreste's trial in the *Eumenides*) the charges of the protagonist's determinism and/or indeterminism (challenging fate). [15 pts.]

6. PREDETERMINED IMPROVISATIONAL EXAMINATIONS:

Questions will be given for weekly readings which may be improvised into examinations during the semester (in other words you will be getting approximately three (3) pop quizzes). [15pts.]

7. **ATTENDANCE & CLASS PARTICIPATION** is necessary since we will be covering a lot of material. Ten (10) points will be assigned for participation and attendance.

OFFICE HOURS: Mondays 5:15-6:15pm. If a problem arises do not hesitate to call me.