

## COURSE OUTLINE

### PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

Many works of fiction explore themes centred around the nature and meaning of the human experience. Philosophy in Literature is a course that examines serious and thought-provoking philosophical issues that find their expression in the words of authors rather than in philosophy textbooks. A wide range of British, Continental and American authors in a varied spectrum of genres will be studied. As the course progresses, students will focus on topics which include the balance of good and evil in the self, despair and redemption, freedom and determinism, meaninglessness and absurdity, death and suffering and the relationship between God and man.

#### **Introduction: 'Elementary'**

An introduction to deductive and inductive reasoning through the Sherlock Holmes stories of Arthur Conan Doyle.

#### **Theme One: 'Human, all too human'**

This section of the course examines the dual nature of the self in Victorian literature. Philosophical insights from this era will include the ideas of Freud, Darwin, Marx and Nietzsche. The central text that is studied is *Jekyll and Hyde* but consideration will be given to these themes in Poe's *The Telltale Heart*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

**Key Text:** RL Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

#### **Theme Two: 'Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains'**

We move on to examine the philosophical issue of free will and determinism from both religious and secular perspectives. Textual material is drawn from a range of British and American books and plays. Key thinkers include Hume, Kant, Sartre and Calvin. The central text is *Of Mice and Men* though the themes will be addressed in Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Greene's *Brighton Rock*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*. Do we have choices or is life predestined?

**Key Text:** John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

#### **Theme Three: 'Judge for yourselves!'**

The course continues by addressing existentialism, a philosophical notion that has often emerged in literature from the late nineteenth to mid twentieth centuries. Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre's ideas will be studied. The main text is Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* though we shall also consider themes in Camus's *The Fall* and Kerouac's *On the Road*.

**Key Text:** Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

## **Theme Four: 'Whence, then, is evil?'**

The final theme looks at the relationship between God and man, specifically with regard to the existence of evil and responsibility. A range of philosophers of religion throughout the centuries will be considered. The main text is Shelley's *Frankenstein* though themes in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Wiesel's *Night* and King's *The Dead Zone* will be discussed.

**Key Text:** Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Students will be expected to read the four key texts for the course and the extracts that are handed out in class; these extracts will include one or two short stories such as Poe's *The Telltale Heart* and Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

## **Objectives**

- To gain some knowledge and understanding of philosophy through the introduction of important philosophical issues and approaches to problems within them.
- To appreciate the expression of the human condition and its philosophical implications in literature.
- To enable the student to develop a critical and constructive approach to problems, and to engage in debates in a rigorous and rational way.
- To foster increased skills in comprehension, interpretation, analysis and evaluation with which to formulate independent opinions supported by viable justification.

## **Outcomes**

- To demonstrate, orally and in written form, knowledge of a range of issues arising in the themes selected for study.
- To show knowledge and understanding of some important positions developed within debates on these themes, and the arguments employed.
- To have acquired knowledge of some major philosophers' ideas and the concepts used within their works.

## **Assessment Process**

Students typically complete two substantial essays in addition to regular classwork and independent reading preparation. The essay marks, combined with an assessment of student performance in class, make up the final grade for the course.

## **Assessment breakdown:**

- 60% essays
- 30% classwork
- 10% class participation and attendance

## Example essay questions

1. How far is Viktor Frankenstein's relationship to his creature analogous to that of God to man?
2. None of Steinbeck's characters in *Of Mice and Men* can be said to be free. Discuss.
3. Socrates once said 'The unexamined life is not worth living'. Could this statement have saved Ivan Ilyich?
4. How is the issue of the subconscious explored in Victorian literature?

## Assessment Criteria

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| <b>DISTINCTION</b><br>Grade A | Student clearly demonstrates an ability to analyse, interpret and critically evaluate the issues, and presents relevant evidence supporting his/her own judgements with reasoned and considered argument. The student shows imagination and insight in his/her responses to issues raised in debate. |
| <b>CREDIT</b><br>Grade B      | Student demonstrates an ability to both analyse and evaluate relevant material and to form judgements with supporting justification.   |
| <b>MERIT</b><br>Grade C       | Student demonstrates a somewhat limited appreciation of the key issues, with supporting material not always well selected, but some relevant material is present. Evaluation is shown but tends to be lacking in depth.  |
| <b>PASS</b><br>Grade D        | Student displays an ability to analyse and interpret a limited range of relevant material. Reasoned criticism will tend to be replaced by the assertion of positions. Problems may be treated as one-dimensional.  |
| <b>FAIL</b>                   | None of the criteria listed above followed.  |

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<http://www.bookshop/blackwell.co.uk> or [www.Amazon.co.uk](http://www.Amazon.co.uk)