

Hope, Memory, and Death: Literature as Examined Life

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Course Description

Why do we write works of fiction, and why do we enjoy reading them? What explains why reading and producing works of literature should be inextricably entwined with the very human condition to which they respond? What kind of change, intentional or otherwise, does writing a work of literature produce in the one who writes it, and how in turn does reading such a work change the one who reads it? If antiquity understood philosophy as the means by which one might hope to live 'the examined life', today it is perhaps literature more than anything else that still performs this venerable function. It is with the challenge of what it might even mean to live an examined life in mind that we will read some works of literature that each demonstrate, in various ways, how literature contributes to that undertaking. First, we will look at the role of hope in human life. How is the very act of writing sometimes itself an expression of hope, and how can reading such a text likewise sustain and inspire hope? Next, we will turn to the related function of memory. How does memory, both individual and collective, enable us to order what would otherwise remain a totally irretrievable past and unpredictable future into a meaningful present? And how does the act of writing function as a means of so doing? Finally, we will turn to death. How, by seriously facing up to mortality, can certain works of literature be understood as the attempt to prepare for the inevitable? This course will introduce students to literature's ability to make thoughtful sense of the time that leads to death.

Texts

Blanchot, Maurice. (2000) *The Instant of My Death*. Translated by A. Stoekl. Stanford University Press.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. 'The Dream of a Ridiculous Man?'. Translated by C. Garnett.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Idiot*. Translated by R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky.

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*

Fitzgerald, Scott F. *This Side of Paradise*

Robinson, Marilynne. *Home: A Novel*

Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1991) *Literature and Existentialism*. Translated by B. Frechtman. New York: Philosophical Library.