LEH 352 Studies in Literature, OA1, 52033
Lehman College, Spring 2026

Syllabus

Section Title: **Evil in Film & Literature**

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Course Description and Learning Outcomes

[Note: The six primary LEH learning Outcomes are embedded in boldface down below.]

Our course ***Evil in Film & Literature*** will traverse two separate paths of intellectual inquiry:

> **I.** We will seek to comprehend the mystery, the riddle, the enigma of evil as it is represented ***in art:*** in great books and on the big screen, both as (a) an ***inner (or subjective) pattern of evil intrinsic to the human person*****,** and (b) as an ***outer (or objective) pattern of evil intrinsic to the outside world and/or nature*****.**
>
> **II.** But additionally, using our own feelings as a guide, we will seek to comprehend whether the art that we engage this semester potentially produces the *effect* of evil (or potentially the *effect* of good) firstly in its audiences and secondly in the world.

In other words, our course ***Evil in Film & Literature*** both examines…

> (I) evil as it is imaginatively represented **"in art";** and
>
> (II) evil as it might come to manifest itself **"after art"** …as the potential *effect* of art, as an *effect* produced first in audiences and then in the world.

Following certain moral and ethical wisdoms from the history of aesthetics -- tracing all the way back to the wisdoms of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato -- we will assume that for a course on "evil and art" it's not enough to query into a pattern evil as it is represented ***in art.*** We will go further, we will ask questions about what comes ***after art*** as the effect (upon audiences and eventually upon the world) of certain patterns represented ***in art.***

This latter mode of intellectual inquiry falls under the category of **"the social responsibility of the artist,"** particularly the social responsibility of those artists who – whether consciously or not – have gestured to communicate evil in the medias of film and literature.

Can an artwork which represents evil further perpetuate evil in audiences and therefore in the world?

Or can an artwork which represents evil still serve to perpetuate the opposite of evil in audiences and in the world?

Ever the faithful student of the history of aesthetics, the great film critic Roger Ebert always wholeheartedly celebrated the representation of evil in art, in film; but at the same to time he even more celebrated that particular art of film-making which could represent evil while at the same time producing the "end" – the social *effect* – of "good" in audiences and in the world.

Ebert, therefore, strongly urged that those artists / creators who have gestured to imaginatively represent evil in art should be held socially accountable to, in some sense, communicate to audiences *their own individual position* towards the evil that they represent. In other words, for Ebert, evil represented ***in art*** should be communicated to audiences precisely as a pattern of behavior that is objectively evil and therefore not-good, not lovable, not amiable—as a pattern to be avoided and rejected in our day-to-day lives at any and all costs.

One of the leading preoccupations of our course, therefore, will be to determine if the art that we engage carries the sort of social responsibility – the sort of social consciousness – that Ebert recommends for the artist who has made it his / her business to represent evil in his / her art.

Ebert wrote:

> I believe art can certainly be nihilistic and express hopelessness… I believe evil can win in fiction…in film, as it often does in real life. But I prefer that the artist express an ***attitude*** toward that evil. It is not enough to record it; what do you think and feel about it?

Shakespeare and most of the essentially "premodern" artists that our course ***Evil in Film & Literature*** will examine this semester occasionally represent evil in their art; but we are never *not* aware of their position, their "attitude," their stance towards evil. In one or another sense, we are never *not* aware of how or what these essentially "premodern" artist's / creator's think and feel about the evil that they represent.

We audiences possess a feeling of ***certainty*** that Shakespeare, to name one artist, comprehends the evil that he represents as socially, spiritually and anthropologically detrimental, impoverished, destructive. In other words, Shakespeare was ***certain*** -- and therefore consequently we audiences are ***certain of Shakespearean certainty*** -- that evil is the enemy or is the absence or is the privation of "the good" in the human person or in the world.

But this certainty did not stop Shakespeare from representing evil ***in art.*** Quite the contrary: Shakespeare needed to represent evil, and usually he represent it in its most subtle, nuanced and mystical guises, both in order to teach us (A) how to identify evil (since evil most often hides) and (B) to communicate the ***certainty*** (which is the opposite of ***ambiguity*****)** that evil in

the human person or in the world ought to be avoided, resisted, side-stepped, eliminated, negotiated out of existence.

However, by contrast, when it comes to some (but not all) twenty-first-century – "post-modern" -- depictions of evil, we audiences are occasionally left with no such ***certainty*** but rather a feeling of quizzical and uneasy ***ambiguity*** before the question –

> *What really is the artist's / creator's personal stance towards the evil that the artist / creator represents?*

So ultimately, to remain with Roger Ebert informed by and in solidarity with the wisdoms of the history of aesthetics is to remain in solidarity with what's "good" and not what's evil for ourselves and for the world. And it is by this solidarity that we're called to ask certain questions of *all art* – of all the artistic and entertainment creations that we engage –

> *Can it be confidently said that a given piece of art or entertainment that we engage is, in some sense, effectively on the side of what's "good"* and "beautiful" and "true" *for us, for culture, for the world?*
>
> *And if it cannot be said that a given piece of art or entertainment that we engage is, in some sense, on the side of what's "good," "true" and "beautiful," then what is it (whether consciously or not) on the side of?*

* * *

Above we have primarily reflected on the question of **"the social responsibility of the artist,"** on the question of a potential pattern of evil that may come to manifest itself in the world ***after art*** and as the ***social effect*** of art.

Below we reflect primarily on the question of the pattern of evil ***in art,*** both as a pattern of evil "in the person" (inner evil) and "in the world" (outer evil):

I. Inner-Evil:

Artistically considered – first, there's the evil in us, inner evil, individual evil, and it is typically comprehended in literature in the form of a "case study" or "character-study" – we may call it *subjective evil* -- as in the *case*-study "Mr. Hyde" of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* in which "the very worst villain is actually inside you."

In the argument of critics who this course examines, Shakespeare poetically invents a dynamism of inner evil– also known as a "poetics of inner evil" – that, whether directly or indirectly, preconditions all poetics of inner evil depicted in either film, stage-drama, fiction or poetry from Shakespeare's time up until our own age.

A Shakespearean "poetics of inner evil" and villainy essentially comes in two forms:

On the one hand, there are those characters who become increasingly aware of the grip evil can hold on them and of the consequences of their battles against it….when the dramatic tension of choosing between virtue or vice – and correlatively of choosing between good or evil -- progressively becomes an internal tension in the "character (or case) study" that effectively leaves the character either suicidal or in a state of moral, emotional or existential agony.

By an alternate Shakespearean poetics of inner evil and villainy, we find characters ("Machiavellians") who, from their own private perspective, are mystically, morally prescient, prophetic and wise; but, from the audience's (or from the reader's) perspective, are objectively evil.

Evil in Film & Literature will analyze versions of the above poetics of inner evil in the characters of Claudius (from the play *Hamlet*), in Iago (from the play *Othello*), in Macbeth (from the play *Macbeth*) and in Edmund (from the play *King Lear.*)

And these Shakespearean evil "character-studies" will serve us as prototypes with which to interpret a poetics of inner-evil in literature, life and film from 1900-2020: in the character of "Uriah Heep" (of Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*); in the character of the "doctor" -- and likewise the "monster" --- of Mary Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein;* and in the character of "Golem" from the film and novel series "Lord of the Rings" by J.R.R. Tolkien. Tangentially, *Evil in Literature, Film & Life* – guided at this phase of the semester by our precursive "character-studies" – comes to examine a modern spin-off of a "poetics of evil" in the pop-culture phenomenon of "evil-children" character-studies, from both popular film and popular literature: including "Tom Riddle" in the *Harry Potter* series; the possessed "Regan" in William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*, the monstrous "Ben" in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*.

Such an ambiguity in which the line between child-innocence and demoniacal child-wickedness is expressed cinematically as thin-- this ambiguity guides us into the question at the very heart of Joseph Conrad's novella on the topic of evil, *Heart of Darkness* –

Is the capacity for evil conditioned [nurtured] or absolute and is it present in all human beings?

II. **Outer-Evil:**

In contrast to inner-evil, there's the evil outside of us, civilizational evil which we all equally share – we will call it *objective evil,* and comprehend it as evil in the external world and / or in nature as an empirical fact —as when Terrence Malick's opens his captivating war-film, *The Thin Red Line,* with the questions…

> *What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? The land contend with the sea? ls there an avenging power in nature?*

Malik's film's characterization of evil as an "avenging power in nature" correlates to the nineteenth-century scientific discovery of the "law of entropy," also known as the second-law of thermodynamics. Advancing nearly decade by decade to its classic formulation by Lord Kelvin in mid-century ("On a Universal Tendency in Nature to the Dissipation of Mechanical Energy"), the law of entropy – characterized by numberless imaginative writers as the very "incarnation" of a malignant evil "energy" set free in the world -- guaranteed that an urge towards

dissolution and decay -- what the ancient Greek's would have associated with "Thanatos," or "death instinct" -- was the irreversible destiny of the universe itself…so much so that these dissolute forces seemed to certain writers of fiction in the second half of the nineteenth century "the natural image of the state of planetary life."

For this phase of our course – on *objective evil in the world*-- we will examine fictionalized characterizations of evil (from 1900 – 2020) as synonymous with two negative -- and indeed self-destructive -- civilizational dynamisms: (1) evil as synonymous with Kelvin's classical formulation of decay and self-annihilation as an empirically verifiable fact of planetary life; and (2) evil as synonymous with the ancient Greek idea of Thanatos, imaginatively characterized as a civilizational "instinct for death" that, as in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49,* is barely brought to the level of civilizational consciousness, civilizational self-awareness.

In other words, civilizational evil in numberless modernist depictions is totally unaware of itself and therefore totally unaware of its trajectory and corroboration with civilizational annihilation.

For example, the obviously evil "Inquisitor" of Martin Scorsese's film *Silence* -- about the 1633 anti-Christian persecutions in Japan – has no awareness that he effectively colludes both with the scientific axiom of entropy and dissolution, and a civilizational version of ancient Greek Thanatos – a death instinct: that is, the "Inquisitor" in *Silence* – and likewise the so-called "evil" Nazi protagonist depicted in the film *Hannah Arendt* -- is depicted as a regular guy who's just doing his job, as a man who seems to be punching a clock as he kills numberless people of faith in a country where people like him must blindly follow the government's demands, or face death themselves.

According to psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, the workings of evil or Thanatos (arguably side by side with the workings of Eros or "life instinct") are eternally at work in the more disturbing aspects of what Jung called the "collective unconscious" shared by all humans in all times and all places. With Jung's hypothesis in mind, *Evil in Literature & Film* will thus treat imaginative works – to include several contemporary 'Zombie Films" – in which the pursuit of evil becomes all the more widespread, civilizational and destructive when the pursuit of evil has little or no awareness of the diabolical nature of its own pursuit – when it effectively becomes the "naïve" pursuit of Thanatos in the "collective unconsciousness."

In *The Crying of Lot 49,* a disembodied chthonic (subterranean) evil presence first streams its way through a fictionalized Garden of Eden*,* then it encompasses the diabolical efforts of such literary figures as Oedipus, Hamlet and --one of literature's most famous embodiments of evil – Faust. Most the characters that populate the world of Pynchon's novel have no idea that the evil and the Thanatos that they perform is the evil and the Thanatos that they perform. In Pynchon's own words, Thanatos and the law of entropy is the expression of an aboriginal evil that is a "blind, soulless" and "brute automatism" –

> Creation was a vast, intricate machine. But one part of it ran off the will of God, its prime mover. The rest ran off some opposite Principle, something [unconscious:] blind, soulless; a brute automatism that led to eternal death. The idea was to woo converts into the Godly [principal]. But somehow those few saved…found themselves looking out into the gaudy clockwork of the doomed with a certain sick and fascinated horror, and this was to prove fatal.

LEH LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Perhaps our main overarching learning aim this semester **[LEH Learning Outcome 5]** will be to consider how we may turn our insights into the problem of evil – and likewise our insights into the presence of a contradictory good in the world -- into approaches for transforming our individual selves and our communities. Additionally, drawing from a variety of sources and points of view on the "problem of evil" in the world, we will seek to gather, interpret and assess **[LEH Learning Outcome 1]** the ways in which a poetics of evil from each of our semester's primary works exist to both set themselves apart and involve themselves in a world-historical conversation with all other antecedent images of evil in literature, philosophy and even in science. Additionally, we will seek to comprehend **[LEH Learning Outcome 2]** each image of the problem of evil fundamentally as a species of "evidence" that the author (whether consciously or unconsciously) provides for readers in support of his / her argument (i.e., thesis) for or against a certain image evil. And we will moreover use these species of "aesthetic evidence," and likewise we will use our shared classroom analyses of them, **[LEH Learning Outcome 3]** to support our own well-reasoned written and oral arguments on our semester's subject, Evil in Film & Literature. As a corollary to our classroom and homework analyses, we will draw **[LEH Learning Outcome 4]** from both classical and contemporary literary and cultural criticism on our semester's subject, and we will seek to involve these contemporary "voices" on our semester's subject with our own "voices," with our own written and oral works. Finally, as a final project, we will produce **[LEH Learning Outcome 5]** a short informal reflection on the semester's material -- a written reflection in which we will primarily seek to demonstrate an ability to evaluate and utilize that multitude of aesthetic and philosophical data on evil which we gathered throughout the semester.

Main Assignments, Grading, Course Expectations

Below is an overview of our semester's key assignments. Please familiarize yourself with the percentages that each of the assignments represent to your final grade for the course, as according to our course's grading approach, which is (roughly) based on a **1192 point grading rubric** subdivided into **4 categories of grading.**

(*Note that -- if I determine that the entire class is overworked at a particular phase of the semester -- there is always the possibility that I will drop an assignment, in which case the 1192 point system will decrease to less than 1192 points.)

What you mainly need to focus on this semester is simple, is 4 separate areas of work (listed below): these all together comprise the 1192 points that you will need to in order to earn the perfect grade of an "A" this semester.

But do note that my 1192 point grading system -- and which includes my tally of the number of assignments that you either submitted or skipped -- constitutes only **90 percent of your grade.**

The other **10 percent of the student's grade** depends on my personal estimation of the quality of a student's style of engagement throughout the semester with the "humanity" of the literary material, with the "humanity" of the professor, with the "humanity" of other students. Why? Because this course is officially a "humanities" course — and therefore a course rooted partly in "quality" of scholarly behavior versus "quantity" of scholarly behavior.

Whatever the case, if you skip work from one or two modules, you will NOT be able to earn a perfect A grade for your final grade. To earn a perfect A for your final grade you are required to submit all the assignments.

Now with the above requirements behind us, just know that I firmly believe that each and every one of you can earn a perfect A for your final grade.

I designed these 4 separate areas of work in the interest of fulfilling one main goal: namely optimizing our common humanity... by which I mean deepening, widening, stretching our potentials for seeing, feeling and knowing ourselves, others and the world by optimizing our abilities for patient and careful reading of and patient and careful writing on an urge / theme of a poetic and mystical nature: namely the urge / theme of evil-- and its opposite: good and goodness.

The 4 separate areas of work are as follows:

(1) 12 "discussion" assignments, totaling 492 points, 41 points for each assignment

(2) 2 informal "essay" assignments, totaling 400 points, 200 points for each essay assignment

(3) 2 "thought experiment" assignments, totaling 200 points, 100 points for each assignment

(4) 1 "final project" assignment, totaling 100 points

I expand on the above overview immediately below:

I. Twelve Module Forum Assignments (corresponding with our 12 Learning Modules):

(492 points, 41 points for each module)

Each learning module will present the following:

1. a variation on a theme, focused on a given variation on the theme of evil in Lit and film

2. learning goals, focused on a given variation on the theme of evil in Lit and film

3. required readings, focused on a given variation on the theme of evil in Lit and film

4. required assignments, (mostly discussion forums) focused on a given variation on the theme of evil in Lit and film

II. Essay Assignments:

(400 points, 200 points for each 5-page essay)

For an explanation of the essay requirements and the essay rubric, go to the START HERE section of our Bb site, and look in the "Main Assignments, Grading, Course Expectations" section.

III. "Thought Experiments" on "the relationship between art and life," your life

(200 points; 100 points for each)

With our "thought experiment" assignments, students will reflect PERSONALLY on the ways in which the experience of evil in ART (i.e., in literature) might relate to the student's own personal experience (or lack of experience) with evil in LIFE.

IV. Final Assignment / Project – write a pretend-online review of the course

(100 points)

With this required assignment you will offer a pretend online review of the course for other potential takers of the course.

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Schedule of Instruction and Assignments: Spring 2026

Module 1 – Due 2/2

Films: *Chaos* (2005); *Open Water* (2003)
Theme: Evil in the Arts: To What End? To the "End" of Evil? Or to the "End" of "the Good"?

Module 2 – Due 2/9

Theater-plays (Films): *Othello, Macbeth, Richard III*
Theme: A Master Class in Shakespearean Evil & Villainy

Module 3 – Due 2/16

Novels: C. Dickens' *David Copperfield;* M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*
Theme: Evil Upbringings: Dickens, "Uriah Heep"; Frankenstein's "Monster"

Module 4 – Due 2/23

Films: *Harry Potter*; *The Exorcist*
Theme: Evil Children: "Tom Riddle" in *Harry Potter*; "Regan" in *Exorcist*

Module 5 – Due 3/2

Films: Terrence Malick, *The Thin Red Line*
Theme: On *a Universal Tendency in Nature to the Dissipation of Mechanical Energy* (Lord Kelvin): "...an evil, avenging power in nature" (Malick)

Module 6 – Due 3/9

Novel/Article: Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49;* Simon Critchley, "What Would David Bowie Do?"
Theme: *Thanatos*-- An "instinct for death" in "Lot 49"; and an "instinct for death" (and resurrection) in David Bowie's death-death-bed vision of contemporary culture

Module 7 – Due 3/16

Film / Essay: Martin Scorsese, *Silence* (2016); Hannah Arendt, on the "Banality of Evil"
Theme: Arendt's "Banality of Evil" in *Silence*

Module 8 - Due 3/23

Film: *Hannah Arendt* (2012)
Theme: "Banality of Evil" in the film *Hannah Arendt*

Module 9 – Due 3/30

Novellas: Hawthorn, "Young Goodman Brown"
Theme: Good and Evil: Is There For Everyone a Clear Distinction?

Module 10 – TBA

Film: Spike Lee, *Do the Right Thing* (1989)
Theme: The Weight of the Past on Our Present Choices: It's Not Always Easy to "Do the Right Thing"

Module 11 – TBA

Readings / Film: Genesis (2-3); Plato, "The Ring of Gyges" Republic (357b- 362d); Milton, Paradise Lost, from Book XII; Luis Bunuel's film *The Young One* (1961)
Theme: "The Fall" -- That Evil Gets Into the World

Module 12 – 4/20

Films: Stephen Frears, *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988)

Theme: Evil, Fidelity & Love

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Thought Experiment 1	**Due 4/27**
Thought Experiment 2	**Due 4/30**
Essay 1	**Due 5/11**
Essay 2	**Due 5/18**
Final Question	**Due 5/20**