

LIVING A MEANINGFUL LITERARY LIFE

SPRING 2020 | PHIL 194Z | John Holliday

ZOOM MEETINGS: FRIDAYS 12:00–2:00 PST • ONGOING DISCUSSIONS ON SLACK

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What makes life meaningful? It's a question that pulls on many, if not most, people; and in this course, we will give it rigorous consideration, with a slight twist. Our guiding question will be what makes for a meaningful *literary* life. In other words, what roll can literature—its creation, consumption, and contemplation—play in living a meaningful life? We will consider matters of narrative, identity, self, social connection, empathy, perception, and attention. But first, we'll lay some groundwork with the question of what makes for a meaningful life in general.

COURSE GOALS

DELIVERABLES

Complete an individual research project, one that you draft, present, revise, and could, in principle, (a) successfully submit to and confidently present at an academic conference or (b) place at a magazine that makes academic issues accessible to a broader audience.

LEARNING GOALS

(1) Think critically about literary value. (2) Gain purchase on our guiding question. (3) Develop comfort with the academic research process. (4) Understand the expectations of (a) philosophy conferences or (b) public humanities outlets.

TEXTS

REQUIRED

Robinson, Marilynne. 2004. *Gilead*. Picador. ISBN: 978-0312424404.

Heti, Sheila. 2018. *Motherhood*. Picador. ISBN: 978-1250214782.

Additional required texts will be posted on Canvas.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Course Requirement	%
Synchronous Participation	10
Asynchronous Participation	10
Relaunch & Coda	5
Research Plan	5
Abstract & Outline	5
Extended Abstract	15
Extended Abstract Comments	10
Presentation	15
Final Paper	25

Note: All work should be typed in Times New Roman, 12-point font (double-spaced), with one-inch margins.

SYNCHRONOUS PARTICIPATION

The success of this class turns largely on your presence and contribution to discussion. You are generally expected to attend every Zoom class meeting. Absences will be excused *only* on account of medical reasons, religious observances, personal emergencies, or conflicts due to COVID-19. For any medical reason, you must submit a note in which you testify that you were too ill to attend class. For any religious observance, you are required to notify me of this *in advance*. Personal emergencies and COVID-19 conflicts will be addressed on a case-by-case basis. All students begin the course with a 100% participation grade (100 points). For every unexcused absence, your participation grade will be reduced 20 points. For every 15 minutes of unexcused lateness, your participation grade will be reduced 5 points.

ASYNCHRONOUS PARTICIPATION

Every week, you are required to post at least two times in our Slack workspace. A post may consist of a question/comment in the #discussion channel, summary of a key issue in the #notes channel, or link to a relevant resource in the #resource channel (one sentence per post is sufficient; posts beyond four or five sentences are discouraged). *Late posts will not be accepted for credit, except if due to medical reasons or personal emergencies* (see policy above). All students begin the course with a 100% participation grade (100 points). For every missed week of posting, your participation grade will be reduced 20 points.

RELAUNCH & CODA

One week, you are required to help shape discussion. This help comes in two forms: relaunching discussion in the second half of the week's Zoom meeting or adding a coda to the week on Slack. Relaunchers should move discussion in a direction they find most promising, while being sensitive to the direction discussion has already taken. Coda-composers should tie together disparate threads, find connections that might have gone unnoticed, and point to interesting questions not yet answered. In either case, you are expected to have a thorough understanding of the texts to be discussed and to have reviewed and critically considered the Slack posts that week. Your performance will be assessed on a 2-point scale.

RESEARCH PLAN

You are required to submit a plan for your research project. This plan must articulate and motivate your research question and include an annotated bibliography of 3–5 key research texts and a standard bibliography of at least six additional texts. The research plan will be assessed against a 100-point rubric.

ABSTRACT & OUTLINE

You are required to submit an abstract for your research paper along with an outline for the paper's whole. The abstract should briefly articulate the research issue/problem and what you will argue in response to that issue/problem (100–175 words). The outline should list all headings and subheadings and give a brief description of each section's goal (50–150 words). The abstract and outline will be assessed against a 100-point rubric.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

You are required to submit an extended abstract for your paper (1000–1250 words). This abstract should extend your discussion of the issue/problem and, most importantly, articulate the paper's primary argument in full. The extended abstract will be assessed against a 100-point rubric.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT COMMENTS

You are required to comment on two of your colleagues Extended Abstracts (250–300 words). Each comment should include a brief explanation of what you understand the paper's goal to be (75 words max) and a discussion of the most pressing issues and objections you envision with respect to the paper's primary argument and/or aims. *Late comments will be penalized severely*. Each comment will be assessed on a 50-point scale.

PRESENTATION

You are required to present a working draft of your research project in class (in 7–9 minutes, with 8 minutes being your target time) and respond to questions from the class. You should present using either slides or a handout; you should not read a draft of your paper. *No late presentations are permitted.* You are also expected to actively participate in the Q&A period of your colleagues' presentations. Your performance will be assessed against a 100-point rubric.

FINAL PAPER

You are (potentially) required to submit a final paper (3000–3500 words, not including references). Your paper should be in a state where it could, in principle, be (a) successfully submitted to and presented at an academic conference or (b) placed at a magazine that makes academic issues accessible to a broader audience. Your paper will be assessed on a 100-point scale.

GRADING SYSTEM

Grades for all assignments will be calculated in terms of raw %. Unless accommodations are made in advance, late assignments will be penalized at least 2.5% per day they are late. Final grades for the course will be calculated as follows: **>70 = S**; **<70 = NC**. "Shadow grades" are conceived as follows:

%	97	93	90	87	83	80	77	73	70	67	63	60	0
letter	A+	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	NP

GRADE DISPUTES

It is my job to grade as accurately and fairly as possible. I take that job seriously. But should you believe I've made an error in recording or assessing any of your assignments, please let me know as soon as possible. If you believe there is an error in recording, submit an email. If you believe there is an error in assessment, speak with me in person (during office hours or by appointment) *and* submit an email detailing why you believe reassessment should be considered. All disputes submitted in a timely manner will receive a response within one week. ***No disputes will be considered after Thursday, June 11th.***

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

All students are expected to comply with Stanford's Honor Code. Any violations of this Code will be confronted and reported. For more information, visit <https://communitystandards.stanford.edu>.

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES AND OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS

If you are unable to meet the deadlines of any course requirements due to religious observances, you are required to notify me of this *in advance*. If you are unable to meet the deadlines of any course requirements due to medical reasons, you must submit evidence documenting the date of a medical appointment or time during which illness prevented the completion of course requirements. If you are unable to meet the deadlines of any of the course requirements due to personal reasons, speak to me as soon as possible (some form of documentation will be required). *No requests for accommodation of any kind will be considered after the last day of class.*

SPECIAL NEEDS AND SITUATIONS

Students with Documented Disabilities: Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty. Unless the student has a temporary disability, Accommodation Letters are issued for the entire academic year. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: <https://oae.stanford.edu/>).

COURSE SCHEDULE

NOTE: THE DAY READINGS ARE LISTED IS THE DAY THEY WILL BE DISCUSSED.

WEEKS 1 & 2: MEANINGFUL LIVES

- F 4/10 | THE MEANING OF LIFE V. A MEANINGFUL LIFE
 Helena de Bres (2018) “Is Philosophy Absurd? Only when You’re Doing it Right”
 Kieran Setiya (2018) “Philosophers Should be Keener to Talk about the Meaning of Life”
 George Saunders (2013) “Sticks”
 Marilynne Robinson (2004) *Gilead* [pages 5–8]
To Do: Select Relaunch & Coda date
- F 4/17 | WHAT MAKES LIFE MEANINGFUL?
 Susan Wolf (2010) “Meaning in Life”
 Christine Vitrano (2013) “Meaningful Lives?”
 Roxane Gay (2014) “Bad Feminist: Take One” & “Bad Feminist: Take Two”
 Marilynne Robinson (2004) *Gilead* [pages 9–58]

WEEK 3: YOUR LIFE AS A LITERARY PROJECT

- F 4/24 | IS THE CRAFT OF LITERATURE APPLICABLE TO THE PROJECT OF A MEANINGFUL LIFE?
 Helena de Bres (2018) “Narrative and Meaning in Life”
 Galen Strawson (2015) “I am Not a Story” *or*
 Strawson (2004) “Against Narrativity” [pages 1–12]
 Tressie McMillan Cottom (2019) “Thick”
 George Saunders (2017) “What Writers Really Do When They Write”
 Marilynne Robinson (2004) *Gilead* [pages 59–133]

WEEK 4: LITERATURE AS A MEANS OF UNPLUGGING

- F 5/1 | WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEANINGFULNESS AND HAPPINESS?
 Kieran Setiya (2014) “The Midlife Crisis”
 Laurence James (2010) “Activity and the Meaningfulness of Life”
 Baumeister et al (2013) “Some Key Differences Between a Happy Life and a Meaningful Life”
 Antonella Delle Fave and Marta Bassi (2009) “The Contribution of Diversity to Happiness Research”
 Marilynne Robinson (2004) *Gilead* [finish]

RESEARCH PLAN DUE Monday 5/4 @ Noon PST on Canvas**WEEK 5: LITERATURE AS A MEANS OF REFLECTING**

- F 5/8 | CAN LITERATURE HELP US SHAPE THE WAY WE UNDERSTAND OURSELVES?
 Kieran Setiya (2016) “Retrospection”
 Nick Riggle (2015) “On the Aesthetic Ideal”
 David Foster Wallace (2004) “Good Old Neon”
 Sheila Heti (2018) *Motherhood* [pages 1–85]

WEEK 6: LITERATURE AS A MEANS OF ATTENDING

F 5/15	<p>CAN LITERATURE HELP US REFRAME THE WAY WE SEE THE WORLD?</p> <p>Bence Nanay (2015) “Aesthetic Attention”</p> <p>Jenny Odell (2019) <i>How to Do Nothing</i>, “Exercises in Attention”</p> <p>Mark Greif (2016) “The Concept of Experience”</p> <p>Sheila Heti (2018) <i>Motherhood</i> [pages 89–201]</p>
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ABSTRACT & OUTLINE DUE Monday 5/18 @ Noon PST on Canvas

WEEK 7: LITERATURE AS A MEANS OF UNDERSTANDING

F 5/22	<p>CAN LITERATURE HELP US BETTER UNDERSTAND OTHERS?</p> <p>David Dodell-Feder and Diana I. Tamir (2018) “Fiction Reading Has Small Positive Impact on Social Cognition: A Meta-Analysis” [pages 1713–14 and 1724–25]</p> <p>David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano (2013) “Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind” [skim]</p> <p>Jukka Mikkonen (2015) “On Studying the Cognitive Value of Literature”</p> <p>Roxanne Gay (2017) “North Country”</p> <p>Sheila Heti (2018) <i>Motherhood</i> [finish]</p>
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT DUE Monday 5/25 @ Noon PST on Canvas

WEEK 8: LITERATURE AS A MEANS OF CONNECTING

F 5/29	<p>DOES LITERATURE OFFER A UNIQUE MEANS OF SOCIAL CONNECTION?</p> <p>Lambert et al (2013) “To Belong Is to Matter” [pages 1418–20 and 1424–26]</p> <p>Vlad Costin and Vivian L. Vignoles (2019) “Meaning Is About Mattering” [pages 864–67 and 877–79]</p> <p>Chloé Cooper Jones (2019) “Such Perfection”</p> <p>Catherine Lacey (2018) “Family Physics”</p> <p>Amy Hemple (1985) “In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried”</p>
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT COMMENTS DUE Monday 6/1 @ Noon PST on Canvas

WEEK 9: YOUR TAKES ON LITERATURE & MEANINGFULNESS

F 6/5	PRESENTATIONS & WRAP-UP
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FINAL PAPER DUE Tuesday 6/9 @ 5:00 pm PST on Canvas