

**HNRS: LITERATURE AND THE POLITICAL ORDER:
HOMER, SHAKESPEARE, DOSTOEVSKY**

An exploration of questions of war, leadership, and ideology in classics of imaginative literature
in the Western tradition

**University of California Los Angeles
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I. Course Description

The disciplines of political and social science are today often marked by highly reductive accounts of human life and social behavior. For many scholars, the only realities we can or should study are those that can be analyzed using the tools of econometrics and statistics. Normative questions are shunned by these individuals in the name of quantitative rigor and rational objectivity. Imaginative literature is meanwhile seen as frivolous at best, dangerous at worst, since poems, plays, and novels distract us from the pursuit of law-like generalities. They beguile us with “unreal” worlds filled with exceptional events and characters that can only be understood through the cultivation of emotional sympathy and even wonder—hardly the methods of “serious” empirical research.

Yet the “Gradgrind mentality,” as Martha Nussbaum names such positivistic and utilitarian views of life, denies us the critical tools we need to make sense of the actual complexities of human experience. Positivism and scientific reductionism are approaches to existence and to thought, Nussbaum writes, that are “blind to the qualitative richness of the perceptible world...blind to what it is like to live a human life and to try to endow it with a human meaning.” While rigorously empirical methods are an essential part of political inquiry, they must be pursued with a healthy appreciation for more humanistic approaches lest scholars, lawyers, judges, economists, and policy-makers lose sight of the very human interests their vocations are meant to serve.

In contrast to the Gradgrind approach to all things political, in this course we will wrestle with questions of violence, power, leadership, and ideology through close readings of some of the greatest works of imaginative literature in the Western tradition. What truths can we discover about political or social realities from poetry, drama, and novels that we could not grasp through other approaches that think only in terms of variables or statistical regressions? And what intellectual and emotional virtues can works of imaginative literature teach us that might be directly related to the survival and flourishing of a decent political order?

We will take as our guides to these questions works by Homer, Shakespeare, and

Dostoevsky, which span very different historical time periods, cultures, and literary genres but which remain powerfully contemporary in their concerns. Homer's *Iliad* provides eloquent albeit disturbing testimony to the dynamics of war, posing fundamental questions about the causes and consequences of violent conflicts as well as our inability to contain or manage them. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Henry IV, Part 1* offer complex pictures of good and bad leadership, charisma, the necessity for—and the corrupting effects of—political power. Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* asks us to think carefully about the political consequences of ideas as they play out over time and even over generations. Like Nietzsche, though from the opposing perspective, he presents us with the dire possibility that the humanistic values that underlie liberal notions of human rights and human dignity simply cannot be sustained in the long run in the absence of strong religious beliefs or in the aftermath of the “death of God.”

This course is a discussion-based seminar intended for highly motivated and mature students who will not be daunted by the length and difficulty of the readings. There will be no lectures. Rather, we will together wrestle with texts in an open atmosphere as shared learners. You should come to class with questions of your own for discussion and be prepared to engage in civil but also energetic dialogue and debate based upon your close reading of our primary texts. This course will also include a strong writing component. You will submit three reflection papers and meet with me twice individually during the quarter to discuss your work. I will have more to say about this part of the course as the quarter progresses (see also Part III below).

II. Required Texts

Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *The Karamazov Brothers*, trans. Ignat Avsey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1998).

Shakespeare, William, *Julius Caesar*, ed. David Daniell (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1998).

_____, *Henry IV, Part 1*, ed. David Scott Kastan (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2002).

III. Grading Scale and Distribution

The grading scale for this course is as follows: A (90-100); B (80-89); C (70-79); D (60-69); F (< 60). You will be assessed based on the following distribution of points:

40% Seminar Attendance and Participation: You are expected to attend all classes and actively contribute to discussions through thoughtful dialogue and respectful (but hopefully also vigorous!) debate with others based upon your careful reading of all assigned texts.

60% Writing Assignments: You will hand in three short reflection papers (each paper counting toward 20% of your overall grade) that address important questions or themes from the readings using only our primary texts as sources. You are required to meet with me by appointment after your first and second papers have been handed in to receive feedback on your writing. Papers should be approximately 1000 words and should be handed in on double-spaced, single-sided pages in 12-point Times New Roman font with one-inch margins on all sides. *Note: there is a letter grade reduction for each day a paper is turned in late.*

IV. Students with Disabilities

Students requesting academic accommodations based on disability are required to register with Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD). A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from OSD when adequate documentation is filed. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early as possible. More information about school policies and procedures for students who need academic accommodations can be found at the OSD website: <http://www.osd.ucla.edu/>

V. Academic Integrity

Your work on all written assignments should be your own. You should not use the words or ideas of others without giving full credit to them using proper citation methods. If you have any questions about how and when to cite other peoples' work you should come and speak with me. Students found to be copying or plagiarizing the work of others on any assignment will receive an automatic failing grade. You are required to submit your three reflection papers both in paper on the date they are due and electronically through Turnitin.

Academic integrity means more, however, than simply not cheating or plagiarizing. It also means fulfilling assignments with the care and rigor of a serious scholar, showing basic respect and courtesy to others both in and out of the classroom (including being in class on time), and being honest and forthright in dialogue. While not all of these virtues are directly subject to grading, they will serve you well in this class and in your academic and professional lives in general.

VI. No Electronic Devices Policy

This course depends upon your active participation as an attentive listener and generous conversation partner with others. Texting devices, internet, and social media are grave impediments to academic conversation and are not permitted in class at any time. As this is a discussion-based seminar, there is also no need for you to use a computer to type extensive notes (although you might periodically wish to jot some notes on paper for your future reference).

VII. Course Outline and Weekly Reading Assignments

Wk.1 (April 1 and 3): Homer, *Iliad*, Books 1-8

Wk.2 (April 8 and 10): Homer, *Iliad*, Books 9-16

Wk.3 (April 15 and 17): Homer, *Iliad*, Books 17-24

***April 17: First reflection paper due**

Wk.4 (April 22 and 24): Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

Wk.5 (April 29 and May 1): Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 1*

Wk.6 (May 6 and 8): Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, Books 1-3

***May 8: Second reflection paper due**

Wk.7 (May 13 and 15): Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, Books 4-5

Wk.8 (May 20 and 22): Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, Books 6-8

Wk.9 (May 27 and 29): Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, Books 9-10

***May 29: Final reflection paper due**

Wk.10 (June 3 and 5): Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, Books 11-12