

Expos 20 • The Underworld

Harvard College • Fall 2021 • TH 1:30-2:45 • CGIS K107

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Office hours: By appointment



Course Description

Hell is popular. In fact, it's been doing much better than heaven. It's practically a literary consensus that Dante's best book is his *Inferno* not *Purgatorio* or *Paradiso*, and that Milton, a Christian believer, got so carried away in describing Satan and hell that he ended up being "of the Devil's party without knowing it" (Blake). And the world today may be more secular than in past generations, but hell is doing just fine. Harvard presents its own interesting case: Currier House's annual "Heaven and Hell" party has situated "Hell" in a room that can hold about 500 people whereas "Heaven" can fit only about 50. (In recent years, heaven was eliminated entirely.) But what are the components of hell – what archetypes or depictions of hell and the underworld helped to cement their importance in American culture? And why is hell so alive in *secular* culture? Why do those people who don't believe that hell is real want to keep imagining it again and again (in *Lucifer*, in *Good Omens*, in *The Good Place*, etc.)?

In our first unit, we will examine famous underworld themes and archetypes as we look at short excerpts from *Gilgamesh*, Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton, Jonathan Edwards, the story of Persephone, and the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. In our second unit, we'll consider how these themes and archetypes are taken up by recent secular texts such as a Stephen King short story, the film *Pan's Labyrinth*, and a *New Yorker* article by Harvard Professor Danielle Allen about her cousin's experience in the American prison system. We'll also read selections from Rachel Falconer's book *Hell in Contemporary Literature* and apply Falconer's ideas to these three primary texts. Finally, in our third unit, you will select and research a contemporary depiction of hell, and make an argument about how

that hell works as a metaphor for a real-world issue or fear (such as the sleaziness of Hollywood, or bickering families, or mental illness, or the vastness of outer space). Throughout, we will try to better understand the curious attraction of hell, and why its 4,000-year-old story shows no sign of ending.

Course Design and Requirements

The assignment schedule for this course, detailed in a separate handout, is comprised of a single-text analysis, a two-text lens essay, and a multiple source research essay. In addition to these three formal papers, you will have short writing assignments or “responses” due before each formal paper. You will also be completing writing exercises or group activities during some class periods.

In **Unit 1**, we will consider brief canonical descriptions of hell and the underworld. In so doing, we will encounter various powerful interpretations and imaginings of what a dark, non-heavenly version of the afterlife might be like. You will write a paper that undertakes a careful close reading of one of these canonical descriptions of hell and makes an original argument about it.

In **Unit 2**, we will begin to consider the ways hell and the underworld live on in the contemporary secular imagination. We will read Stephen King’s story “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is in French,” Danielle Allen’s article “American Inferno,” and parts of Rachel Falconer’s book *Hell in Contemporary Literature*; we will also watch the film *Pan’s Labyrinth*. You will write a lens essay in which you apply one of Falconer’s ideas to the story, article, or film in order to make an original argument about your chosen primary text. Your essay should uncover something *new* about that text that wouldn’t be apparent without the use of Falconer.

In **Unit 3**, you will research a contemporary incarnation of hell or the underworld. You’ll select a recent primary text that depicts hell (such as a film, TV show, story, novel, poem, or play). You’ll then make an argument about how that text uses the concept of hell, as well as famous hell themes and archetypes, to reckon with a fraught reality in the external world (such as mental illness, war, fear of technology, the trials of white-collar office work, anxieties about cavernous underground spaces etc.). One of the challenges of this essay will be to work with multiple sources, creating a context for understanding your chosen hell text. Another challenge – and also a great opportunity – is that you will work more independently in this essay: choosing the text to research, selecting sources, and finding at least five sources of your own.

Required Texts/ Materials

- Coursepack for Expos 20, “The Underworld” – available at Gnomon Copy, on Mass. Ave.
- *Pan’s Labyrinth* (available on Netflix; \$4 to rent from major streaming services)

- A ruled spiral notebook to write in during class and a pencil/pen.
Please bring the coursepack and notebook to every class

In addition, I will send out several essays/excerpts throughout the semester.

Course Methods

Saving Your Work, Keeping Updated

•You must check your e-mail account and the course website daily. I strongly recommend storing all your work for this course on both a primary and secondary drive (cloud, dropbox, or other). Remember to save all of your writing. Computers failing will not constitute an excuse for missing/late work.

Readings and Responses

• Class readings are an essential part of the course. You will not be able to pass the class if you do not complete the readings and responses on time.

Communication

•All course communication will be conducted over the e-mail address established for each student by the university. If I should need to cancel class because I am sick or if there is another emergency, I will do so by e-mail, so **please check your university account before coming to class.** The course website will also be used extensively throughout the course.

Contacting me

•E-mail or scheduling an appointment are the best ways to reach me if you have questions or concerns. I also will hold office hours (times to be announced) immediately before papers are due.

If you have concerns about your work, or if personal problems are causing you to have trouble in class, you should come talk to me as early as possible. I will be more able to accommodate you the earlier you come to see me. For instance, if you're having trouble with an assignment, I will be able to offer more help before you turn in the assignment than after the assignment has been turned in and graded. I will also be able to help more if you get in touch a week before the assignment is due rather than the night before it's due. In other words, please do talk to me about any issues you may have relating to this class – and the earlier the better.

Writing Center

•At any stage of the writing process – while brainstorming ideas, reviewing drafts, or approaching revisions – you may find yourself wanting help with your essays above and beyond your conferences with me and our in-class peer workshops. The Writing Center offers appointments with trained tutors, and is an invaluable resource. Visit the Writing Center's website at <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr> to make an appointment.

Participation

Participation means coming to class, demonstrating knowledge of any readings, participating fully in workshops and group assignments, completing all response assignments on time, and showing active engagement in scheduled conferences over the course of the semester.

- More on the subject of participation: It is unacceptable to use the web in any way not directly related to our class work during class time. Do not use class time to check your Facebook or e-mail account, for instance. Do not take calls or text during class. Using your computer or phone for purposes not related to class work will negatively affect your participation grade for the course.

Notebooks

Periodically throughout the semester you will be asked to do some in-class writing and note-taking. All of this writing should be done in a single spiral notebook, which you will hand in at the end of the semester. This notebook will be evaluated solely on the effort put into it. The notebook is meant to be exploratory and to provide a way for you to brainstorm, so I don't expect your thoughts to be fully formed or beautifully articulated here.

Conferences

- You and I will have three individual 25-minute conferences over the course of the semester – one for each essay assignment – to discuss your drafts. These conferences are an extremely valuable opportunity to focus your work during the revision process, as well as to talk about your progress as a writer. I will expect you to come prepared, having carefully reviewed my notes on your drafts, considered any questions you may have, and developed a plan of attack for revision. Conference weeks are extremely busy; if you miss or are unprepared for your scheduled conference, you will not be able to reschedule, so please plan ahead. It's also crucial that you arrive on time, so we can start talking about your essay right away.

Policy on Collaboration

- As in many academic situations, our Expos class will be a setting that involves frequent collaboration--we will develop ideas together through class discussion, peer review, and draft workshops. The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students and through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). It is a form of academic integrity to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay; you can do this in a footnote at the beginning of the paper. As stated in the *Student Handbook*, "Students need not acknowledge discussion with others of general approaches to the assignment or assistance with proofreading." However, all work submitted for this course must be your own: in other words, writing response papers, drafts or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

Academic Honesty:

The following is Harvard College's policy on academic honesty as stated in the Handbook for Students: *It is expected that all homework assignments, projects, lab reports, papers, theses, and examinations and any other work submitted for academic*

credit will be the student's own. Students should always take great care to distinguish their own ideas and knowledge from information derived from sources. The term "sources" includes not only primary and secondary material published in print or online, but also information and opinions gained directly from other people. Quotations must be placed properly within quotation marks and must be cited fully. In addition, all paraphrased material must be acknowledged completely. Whenever ideas or facts are derived from a student's reading and research or from a student's own writings, the sources must be indicated.

Throughout the semester we'll work on the proper use of sources, including how to cite and how to avoid plagiarism. You should always feel free to ask me questions about this material. All the work that you submit for this course must be your own, and that work should not make use of outside sources unless such sources are explicitly part of the assignment. Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to review by the Honor Council, including potential disciplinary action.

Classroom Etiquette

Everyone in the class is expected to be respectful and civil to other members of the class. All discussions, regardless of subject matter, will be conducted in a civil, respectful, and adult manner. Harassment will not be tolerated in any form and will result in disciplinary action. Likewise, derogatory language or actions will result in ejection from our classroom.

Also, again, plan on quitting out of all apps not related to class, and on having your phone silenced and put away.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you think you will require some flexibility in deadlines or participation in the course for reasons of a documented disability, please schedule a meeting with me early in the semester so we can discuss appropriate accommodations. (To be eligible for such accommodations, you need to have provided documentation to the Accessible Education Office ahead of time.) The Accessible Education Office works closely with Expos courses, and we will develop a plan that is appropriate for your needs. Please note that it is always your responsibility to consult with me as the need for those accommodations arises.

Grading

85%—Major Writing Assignments: Three papers. First paper (20%), Second Paper (25%), Third Paper (40%)

5%—Regular, Informed Contributions to Class Discussion

5%—Participation: This means coming to class, demonstrating knowledge of any readings, participating fully in workshops and group assignments, completing all response assignments on time, and showing active engagement in scheduled conferences during the course of the semester.

5%—**Notebook** (see more on the notebook above).