

Expos 20 • The Underworld

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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. (This past year 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 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 *Supernatural*, in *South Park*, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 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, play, or nonfiction essay). 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

- Coursepack for Expos 20, “The Underworld” (available at Gnomon Copy, on Mass. Ave)

Please bring the coursepack to every class.

In addition, I will hand out several essays/excerpts in class 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, flash, 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 (located on the garden level of the Barker Center, telephone 617-496-1655) offers hour-long 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.

Course Policies

Completion of Work

- Because your Expos course is a planned sequence of writing, you must write all of the assigned essays to pass the course, and you must write them within the schedule of the course – not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind. You will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements, therefore, if you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit. The letter will also specify the new date by which you must submit the late work, and be copied to your Resident Dean. *If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date, and you have not documented a medical problem, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.*

Late Work

- Assignments are always due at the beginning of class on the due date. Any work handed in after I have collected/checked it will be considered at least one day late. At the beginning of each new 24-hour cycle, your paper loses 1/2 of a letter grade. (**This policy does not apply to response assignments.** Since response assignments receive credit or no credit, all late responses will receive a 0.) Plan ahead for computer mishaps; lateness to class because of last-minute printing will not be accepted as an excuse.

Electronic Submissions

- **I will not accept assignments by e-mail unless I have explicitly asked for them to be submitted electronically.** When sending or uploading a document, it is your responsibility to ensure that you have saved the document in a form compatible with Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx). It is also your responsibility to ensure that the file you are sending is not corrupted or damaged. If I cannot open or read the file you have sent, the assignment will be subject to a late penalty.

Harvard College Writing Program Policy on Attendance

- Because Expos has a shorter semester and fewer class hours than other courses, and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential. *If you are absent without medical excuse more than twice, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.* On the occasion of your second unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your situation. This letter will also be sent to your Resident Dean, so the College can give you whatever supervision and support you need to complete the course.

Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In the case of a medical problem, you should contact your preceptor before the class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours: otherwise you will be required to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or your Resident Dean. *Absences because of special events such as athletic meets, debates, conferences, and concerts are not excusable absences.* If such an event is very important to you, you may decide to take one of your two allowable unexcused absences; but again, you are expected to contact your preceptor beforehand if you will miss a class, or at least within 24 hours. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you should contact your Resident Dean and you must directly petition the Expository Writing Senior Preceptor, who will grant such petitions only in extraordinary circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.

Lateness

•**Class starts promptly at 7 minutes past the hour.** Lateness is defined as arriving within 10 minutes of the beginning of class. (If you arrive after the first 10 minutes, you are welcome to participate in class activities, but you will be recorded as being absent for that class period.) You are allowed to be late to class twice. Any subsequent incident of lateness after the second will be recorded as an absence.

Participation

•Participation means coming to class, being informed, speaking regularly, completing all in-class assignments (including group work), and attending scheduled conferences during the course of the semester. Peer response assignments are factored into your participation grade.

•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 computers or cell phones for purposes not related to class work will negatively affect your participation grade for the course.

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 comments 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.

Policy on Collaboration

•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). If you would like to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay, it is customary to 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:

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. Part of this classroom etiquette is remembering to turn off all cell phones or other electronic equipment before the beginning 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 the classroom.

Grading

95%--**Major Writing Assignments:** Three papers. First paper (20%), Second Paper (30%), Third Paper (45%)

5%--**Active, intelligent participation:** This means coming to class, being informed, speaking regularly, participating fully in workshops and group assignments, completing assignments on time, and attending scheduled conferences during the course of the semester.

