

Expos 20 • The Underworld

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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.
- 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 email account 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 email 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 email, so **please check your university account before coming to class.** The course website will also be used extensively throughout the course.

Contacting me

- Email 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 writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu to make an appointment.

Course Policies

Harvard College Writing Program Policy on 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). If you are unable to complete your work on time due to medical or family issues, please contact me before the deadline to discuss both the support you might need as well as a possible new arrangement for your deadline. Communication about your situation is essential so that

we can determine how best to help you move forward. If we have not already discussed your situation and you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit, you will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements and asking you to meet with me and/or your Resident Dean to make a plan for catching up on your work. (In the research paper assignment, the paper must include work with multiple sources to be accepted.) The letter will also specify the new date by which you must submit the late work. If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date, and if you have not documented a medical problem or been in touch with your Dean about other circumstances, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.

Policy on Late Work and Deadlines

• Assignments are always due at the times listed on canvas. 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.) Note also that, unless you have received an extension, I will not read drafts turned in after the deadline. Plan ahead for computer mishaps.

Keeping up with the course deadlines is necessary to your continued learning. For this reason, I grant extensions only in exceptional circumstances. If you find yourself dealing with medical issues, family emergencies, or extraordinary situations that genuinely interfere with your work, please let me know.

Electronic Submissions

• You will submit your work electronically this semester through canvas. **I will not accept assignments by email unless I have explicitly asked for them to be submitted that way.** When 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

• The Writing Program attendance policy is intended to make sure that you get everything you can out of your Expos course. Because Expos has fewer class hours than some other courses; because the course is largely discussion-based; and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential to your learning in the course.

While I of course encourage you to be present every day in class, you are allowed two unexcused absences for the semester with no consequence. Some absences (religious holidays and medical situations) are automatically considered excused; some family circumstances may also be counted as excused absences. You are expected to notify me ahead of time about those absences unless circumstances make that impossible. If you miss a third class for unexcused reasons, I will ask you to meet with me to discuss your plan for catching up with any missed work, as well as issues that may be affecting your attendance or that might require attention or support from your advisers or from other College resources. If you miss a fourth class, your Resident Dean will be notified about

those absences, so that your Dean can give you any support you may need to help you get back on track in the class. Missing four classes—the equivalent of two full weeks of the semester—puts you at risk for missing crucial material necessary to complete your work. Unless there is a medical or other emergency issue preventing consistent engagement with the class, students who miss four classes will receive a formal warning that they are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.

In the case of a medical problem, you should contact me before the class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours; you should also copy your Resident Dean on that message. In the case of extended illness, you may be required to provide medical documentation. Absences because of special events or extracurricular involvement are not excused absences. If such circumstances lead you to want to miss more than two unexcused absences, you must petition the Associate Director of the Writing Program for permission.

Lateness

•**Class starts promptly at its scheduled time.** 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, demonstrating knowledge of any readings and of the emails I send out, 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: do not use your computer or phone during class unless I have asked you to do so for class work. Please have your phone silenced, and both your computer and phone put away.

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.

Policy on Academic Integrity

•One of the essential elements of the Expos curriculum is the work we do on effective source use, appropriate acknowledgement of sources, and expectations for citing sources in academic writing. In each unit, we will work on strategies for working with the ideas of other authors and sources, and for developing your own ideas in response to them. Most forms of academic writing involve building on the ideas of other writers and thinkers, contributing ideas of your own, and signaling clearly for readers where each idea comes from. This complex relationship with sources is part of our work through the whole semester, and you should always feel free to ask me questions about this material.

As we become familiar with the expectations of an academic audience, we will also work on strategies to avoid errors in citation and unintentional plagiarism. As with all your courses, the expectation in Expos is that *all the work that you submit for this course must be your own. Your 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.

In addition to acknowledging how other writers have contributed to your work, doing your work with integrity means developing ideas that are wholly and genuinely yours. For this reason, students are prohibited from using ChatGPT or other generative AI tools for any stage of the writing process in Expos. The reasons for this policy in Expos are important: you discover your ideas in the messy process of drafting and revising them. Engaging with that writing process develops your ability to think clearly, organize that thinking, find appropriate evidence, pursue deeper nuances in and counterarguments to your claims and the evidence you use to present them, and work through alternative positions and evidence. To outsource any of that process to AI robs you of the practice with these skills that will strengthen your thinking; turning to AI essentially means you are giving up *your voice* in an essay, accepting instead an average and generic answer (which is what generative AI produces). In your Expos course, submitting work as yours that you did not develop or create on your own is a violation of the Harvard College Honor Code.

While the product of an Expos class may be the papers that you write, the broader goal is to strive to become better *thinkers*. The ability to participate independently in important discussions, the confidence to add your voice to challenging topics, the precision of mind to understand when a speaker is credible and should be taken seriously and when that isn't the case—these are all skills you develop through that rigorous thinking process that writing fosters. Allowing generative AI to take the place of that thinking shortchanges your development as a writer, a thinker, and a creative participant in developing ideas. In our class, your classmates and I are eager to hear what *you* have to say.

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, unless I ask you to do otherwise (or you get special permission), please do not use a laptop or tablet in class, and have your phone silenced and put away.

Policy on Feedback and Conferences

- Feedback is central to Expos. For each paper assignment, you will receive either substantive written feedback, a conference about your draft, or both. There are educational reasons for the amount and timing of the feedback I as your instructor will offer. The goal of all my feedback is that you learn to incorporate the principles I'm identifying into your *own* thinking and your revision, so that eventually you are making more independent decisions in your essays about what a reader needs to understand or what the most effective structure might be. If I as your instructor were to read a draft multiple times, offering several rounds of feedback, I would then in effect be taking over some of those decisions for you, and you would not be gaining the autonomy as a writer that you need to achieve this semester.

There are also important reasons that I schedule one draft conference per student for each essay. Conferences are important opportunities for thinking together about questions in your argument and strategies for revision; during conference week I am meeting with all 30 students and attempting to offer the same level of intensive work with everyone. If I were to grant a second full conference to any student, for reasons of equity I would need to offer a second meeting with everyone, and it is not possible to schedule a second round of meetings in an already busy unit.

Policy on Course Materials

- The work we do together in class—discussions, exercises, workshopping essays—is intended for the members of our class. Students are not allowed to record class and are not allowed to post video or audio recordings or transcripts of our class meetings. (Students needing course recordings as an accommodation should contact the [Disability Access Office](#).) While samples of student work will be circulated within the course (and all work you do may be shared with your classmates), you may not share fellow students' work with others outside the course without their written permission. As the *Handbook for Students* explains, students may not “post, publish, sell, or otherwise publicly distribute course materials without the written permission of the course instructor. Such

materials include, but are not limited to, the following: video or audio recordings, assignments, problem sets, examinations, other students' work, and answer keys." Students who violate any of these expectations may be subject to disciplinary action.

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 [Disability Access Office](#) ahead of time. Please let me know if you are unfamiliar with that process.) The Disability Access 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 (including the contents of emails I send out), 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).