

## Honors Thematic Intellectual Traditions Recent Course Descriptions

### Gods & Monsters

We think most immediately of gods as celestial figures of holiness and light that we are guided toward; monsters are repulsive, frightening beings that prowl the labyrinths of dark from which we recoil. Gods are morally and spiritually (and often physically) perfect; monsters are (with few exceptions) malformed, unnatural embodiments of moral and spiritual corruption. Complete opposites, right? Well, yes – and no. This course will explore some of the fascinating ways in which our cultural deities and monsters, for all their opposing traits, converge as figures of radical Otherness and excess, who mutually exist in the no-man’s land where maps run out, where reason falters, and where we discover our most intimate human selves.

### Community and Identity

“Forgetfulness, and I would even say historical error, are essential in the creation of a nation.” — Ernest Renan

“It’s not down on any map; true places never are.” — Herman Melville

This Intellectual Traditions course will explore the bonds that unite individuals together into communities. What does it mean to be “a people,” and how has the answer to that question changed both within and between different cultures over time? Who is part of the community, and who is excluded? How do the boundaries we draw—figurative and literal—define us, in turn; \*how\* identities have been and are constructed socially, culturally, and politically and in the process perpetuate conflict and inequality. In short, we will test the borders that define what it means to belong. Our wide-ranging study will cover novels, stories, plays, religious works, and other art, film, and written texts. We will explore not only traditional concepts of tribalism, colonialism, and nationalism, but also the intersectionality of different communities of identity (gender, race, orientation) within larger cultures. Our primary focus will be on critically reading texts to understand how these ideas have developed and evolved based upon time, place, and culture, but our study will also give us opportunities to venture out into our own communities and to write and think about how these ideas apply to we, “the people,” ourselves.

### Revolutions

The idea of “REVOLUTION” has come to frame the rapid and often radical shifts in the social, political, religious and scientific order for more than half a millennium. This Intellectual Traditions course will explore how this idea has come to permeate our history, our literature, our art and culture and politics. Our wide-ranging study will cover novels, stories, plays, scientific, philosophical and religious works, as well as other art, texts, and films. Our explorations will range from the scientific revolution of Copernicus to the reformation of Martin Luther, the establishment of the American Democratic Republic to the fight for equal rights of women and racial minorities to the economic revolt of the working classes.

Our primary focus will be on critically reading texts within their own contexts to understand how this idea of “revolution” has arisen across different times, places, and cultures as we explore how these texts have inspired—or countered—revolution. Along the way, we will question, along with Jefferson, whether revolution is inevitable—or even an integral component to advance human society.

### (En) Gendered Ideas

This course will take a gendered approach to ways of thinking and acting in prescriptive and descriptive texts as a way of addressing topics such as patriarchy, feminism, power dynamics, property, religious doctrine, gendered health, sex and the body. It will provide a foundation for today’s focus on gender justice and equality. We will strive to answer questions such as: Is gender becoming an outdated notion? Why do gender roles emerge and how have these roles changed? Are gender roles based on essential “femaleness” and “maleness”? Are they socially constructed, biologically constructed, or both? Is it a binary or a continuum? What happens when these roles are transgressed?

### Signifying Bodies

This course explores the intersections of the human body and represented systems in a variety of historical contexts. We will investigate the ways in which flesh carries meaning and ask how those meanings shape us as embodied subjects. We will discuss case studies in the visual arts, literature, and sciences, and will consider the representations and meanings of bodies in relation to themes including standards and deviations, feelings & sensations, and commodification and control. Assignments and classroom activities seek to aid in the development of your skills of observation, description, analysis, and argument.

### Evil

This course explores the persistent problem of “evil” in the literary and philosophical context of modernity. The concept of evil does not disappear after the paradigmatic shifts in thought brought by the scientific revolution and the philosophical enlightenment, but it does assume new meanings. In fact, the “age of reason” stimulates greater curiosity regarding the aims or motives behind so-called “evil” acts. Through art, literature, philosophy and public discourse, modern societies continue to wrestle with definitions and the social function of “evil”. Language around human tragedy remains steeped in notions of personal and collective responsibility, using moral and ethical terms to formulate the various questions of preventable harm and conditional motivation. Theories of evil attempt to refine our understanding of human behavior according to a dualist logic of vice and virtue, even as these words feel antiquated to contemporary ears. Although modern thought seems to have transcended ideas like hereditary guilt or original sin, the notion of evil retains a descriptive utility. Class discussions and assignments will focus our critical thinking within and around various social, political, aesthetic and religious dimensions of the problem of evil.

## Freedom and Constraint

This Intellectual Traditions course investigates the concept of freedom in philosophy, literature, and art. From ancient Greece and the American and French revolutions to abortion laws and vaccine mandates, appeals to “freedom” have been a ubiquitous—and famously vague—rallying cry. But what does freedom really mean? How do conflicting beliefs about freedom influence our daily life and bodily autonomy? And what, if anything, can art, literature, and philosophy contribute to our conversations about freedom and its purported opposites tyranny and constraint? More specifically, how have a range of artists and writers employed formal constraints as a potent (and paradoxical) form of agency? We will consider these complex issues via specific texts and our own writing. We’ll look at definitions of freedom in Western and Eastern philosophy while examining the role of formal constraints in modern and contemporary writing and other media such as music and visual art. You will have the opportunity to experiment with written forms and conduct collaborative, interdisciplinary research in areas of contemporary social concern to explore how various media and artistic movements have tried to model a dynamic freedom-in-constraint.

## Gender, Performance & Performativity

Utilizing primarily dramatic literature, including ancient and contemporary scripts, this course will explore how culture creates identity through and within performance. The intellectual tradition of scripting gender follows a parallel trajectory to that of the Western traditions of social construction and political influence and we will map these along with the effect performance has had on the performativity of gender itself. Gender is a construct that ties nearly every branch of society to another, using hierarchies, norms, and dogma to keep firm what is actually quite fluid within individual identities. This journey will examine what it has meant and will mean to continue the tradition of gender performance.

## **Why Work? Work and Labor from Antiquity to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Is work a curse or a blessing, a necessary evil or the means to fulfillment? According to Ancient Greek myth and the Hebrew Bible, human labor is the divine punishment for hubris and disobedience. In the late medieval and early modern era, many Christians believed work was the way to get to heaven. The old proverb “idle hands are the devil’s playground” warns us that work is what keeps us out of trouble, but the 19<sup>th</sup> c. thinker, Karl Marx, wrote that work is the defining quality of being human. How do your own ideas about work fit into this matrix?

“Work” is our most general word for doing something: going to work, working in the garden, working the crowd, busy work. “Labor”, on the other hand, has a different connotation, and a history related to suffering under a burden, demanding physical work (“manual labor”) and the pain women suffer in childbirth. How do attitudes toward “work” and “labor” reflect a society’s values? How do class and gender issues factor into our thinking about “work”? Are there issues of justice to address in the world of work?