Fall 2025

Duke English Graduate Course Descriptions

ENG 590S-3.01 SP TOP SEMINAR III: **WAR-HOLE**

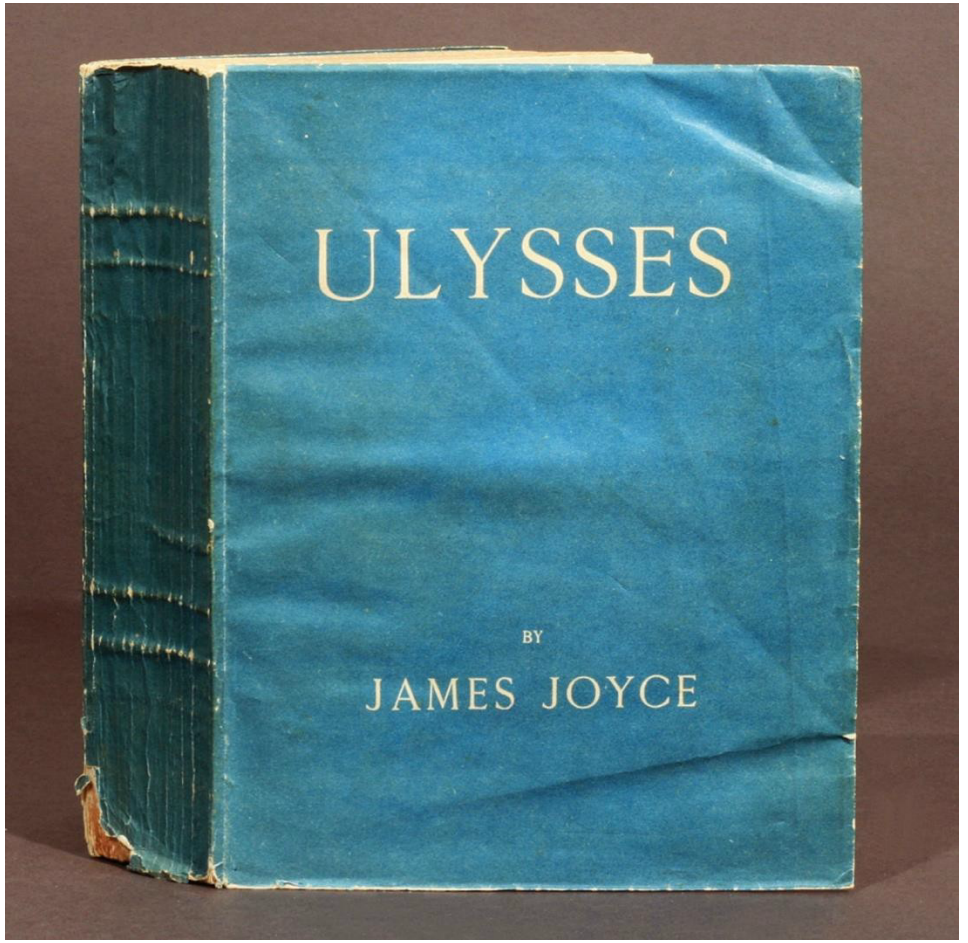
Taylor Black

A deep dive into the life and work of Andy Warhol and key figures of the so-called Warhol Factory, both notable and obscure. We will study the films, artworks, novels, albums, and ephemera Andy and other Factory members created. In doing so, we will consider how Andy and his Factory imagined a popular cultural universe for their time and the future. To guide our work with primary sources, we will turn to key texts in American Studies, Queer Theory, Literary Studies, and Cinema Studies. Undergraduate students will be expected to write two short essays and either a creative final project or a third essay. Graduate students will submit a traditional seminar paper or two shorter essays.

ENG 590S-3.02 SP TOP SEMINAR III: ***ULYSSES* IN THEORY**

Aarthi Vadde

James Joyce's *Ulysses* turned 100 years old in 2022. The novel to end all novels, the influence of *Ulysses* on twentieth century literature and theory is unparalleled. In this seminar, we will dedicate ourselves to reading *Ulysses* in its entirety alongside *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (necessary priming for *Ulysses*) and canonical works of literary theory and criticism that were inspired by *Ulysses* or responded directly to it. Possible theorists and critics include T.S. Eliot, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Karen Lawrence, Leo Bersani, and Vincent Cheng. Reading Joyce in this way will ground students in the aesthetic innovations of modernism, its central philosophical and political questions, and the history of its reception among influential critics and theorists in the academy. Additionally, we will read some current scholarship tied to the "new modernist studies" and "global modernism," schools of thought that have brought new methodologies to bear on the study of literary modernism. No prior exposure to Joyce is required to take this course or do well in it. What is required is a willingness to read slowly, to reread, and to take the plunge of discussing a writer who said this about *Ulysses*: "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of insuring one's immortality." Graduate paper options will include one long seminar paper (20 pages) or two shorter conference-style papers (10 pages). Shorter papers for undergraduates interested in graduate-level courses are an option.



ENG 590S-5.01 SP TOP DIVERSITY: FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

Douglas Jones

This course reads deeply in the political philosophy of Frederick Douglass and that of contemporaries in the long nineteenth century. We will use Douglass' interventions to explore several key concepts in political theory, especially democratic theory. These include: the people; legitimacy; slavery and freedom; violence; freedom of speech; duty; and personhood. At the core of our study will be an exploration of the centrality of literature, performance, and print culture to the making of democratic culture and thought. Nineteenth-century literary writers we will read include Walt Whitman, Harriet E. Wilson, Frances Harper, Fanny Fern, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ida B. Wells, and Henry James, among others. Contemporary political theorists we will read include Melvin Rogers, Danielle Allen, Robert Gooding-Williams, Lawrie Balfour, Kedrick Roy, Jason Frank, and Jeanine DeLombard, among others.

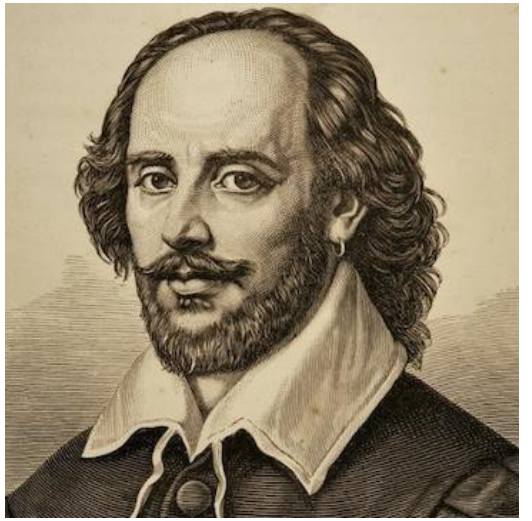
ENG 890S.01 SPECIAL TOPICS SEMINAR: **PLANETARY EXPERIMENTS**

Rob Mitchell

This course focuses on the history and theory, as well as literary and artistic representations, of "planetary experimentation." Interest in the Anthropocene has brought the concept of planetary experimentation to the fore, insofar as the Anthropocene has been described as the result of "a large-scale geophysical experiment of a kind that could not have happened in the past nor be reproduced in the future," or as an "unintended experiment of humankind on its own life support system." While alternative terms such as the Capitalocene or Plantationocene stress that it is not "humankind," but rather a small subset of humans, who are responsible for this experiment, advocates of these alternative terms still tend to understand phenomena such as global warming, the spread of microplastics to essentially every site on the earth, and rapid species extinction in terms of irresponsible planetary experimentation. The goal of this course is to explore different theories and the history of planetary experiments. This involves considering different recent theories of "planetarity" (e.g., those of Latour, Spivak, Chakrabarty, and Hui, as well as work in the "planetary humanities"), and considering how concepts of experimentation link up with these theories of planetarity. For our understanding of experimentation, we will draw heavily on work in science and technology studies (STS), while at the same time keeping in mind that planetary experiments tend not to fit easily into the usual understanding of experimentation as lab-based, replicable, etc. We will also consider theories of experimentation that do not emerge from within the natural sciences, and ways in which different literary genres and artistic projects have sought to understand or stage planetary experimentation. We will consider, for example, fictions about explicit planetary experiments (e.g., geoengineering or the intentional global spread of nanotechnologies or artificial intelligence), as well as fictions about responses to *unintentional* planetary experiments, such as the accidental release and global spread of a technology or virus, or the aftereffects of industrial processes that alter earth systems. We will focus especially on how literature and art projects imagine or instantiate *agency* and *responsibility*, and consider how these accounts compare to science and technology studies accounts of planetary experiments. The guiding premise of the course is that the history and language of planetary experimentation can open up contemporary discussions of engineering and technical solutionism to a critical history of politics, truth, and aesthetics.

ENG 890S.02 SPECIAL TOPICS SEMINAR: SHAKESPEARE, TRAGEDY, PHILOSOPHY

Sarah Beckwith



A first aim of this class will be to explore Shakespearean tragedy as a "lethal attempt to deny the existence of another as essential to one's own." So tragedy in Shakespeare's handling turns out to explore acknowledgment as the home of our knowledge of others and of ourselves. This class explores Shakespeare's tragedies as a set of meditations on the costs of denying that we share language. Why does this idea become compelling and attractive right then? How is such a denial so much as possible? We will focus on Shakespeare's late tragedies (*King Lear, Macbeth, Coriolanus, Timon of Athens, Anthony and Cleopatra*), as well as *Hamlet*, and *Othello*. We will also ponder the tragic matrix of comedy in plays such as *Much Ado About Nothing*, as well as those plays that begin as tragedies but turn aside from that form: *The Winter's Tale*, and possibly *The Tempest* if we have time.

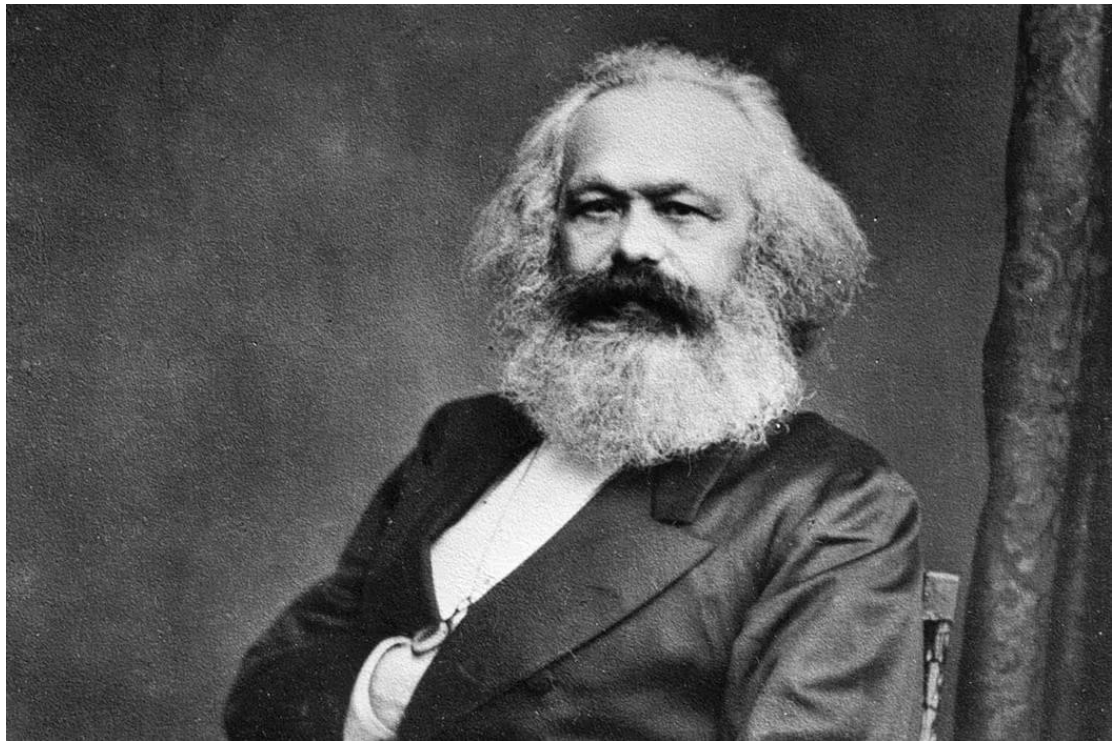
A second aim of the class, and closely connected with the first, is an exploration of ordinary language philosophy (Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell) in relation to theatre. I see a natural affinity between the practices of theater and the practices of ordinary language philosophy because each practice is committed to examining particular words used by particular speakers in particular situations. Each practice understands language as situation, which is different from "context" because sometimes we only understand the context when we understand what it is that is being said. Ordinary language philosophy makes the very radical claim that we will fail to understand what something means until we understand what it does, until we understand the force of the words used on any particular occasion as, say, entreaty, command, order, suggestion, permission, request, prayer. Each practice understands language as act, as event in the world, and so asks us to extend our conception of the work of language beyond the work of representation, the chief focus of historicism old and new.

We will read some central essays of J.L. Austin, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, and especially Part 4 of Stanley Cavell's work: *The Claim of Reason: Skepticism, Morality, Acknowledgment, Tragedy* where we will attempt an exploration of the intimacy of these four terms to each other. This will help us explore tragedy's work between "avoidance and acknowledgment."

This class should be of interest to anyone interested in exploring Shakespeare, tragedy as a genre, theatre, ordinary language philosophy and ethics, and performance studies. Undergraduates who would like to take this course are welcome to discuss this with me and can obtain permission to join the course.

ENG 890S.03 SPECIAL TOPICS SEMINAR: **HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY LITERARY CRITICISM**

Richard So



This course provides students with a concise historical and theoretical overview of university-based literary criticism, with the goal of enabling graduate students to better understand – and hence, situate their own projects within – the history of their discipline. Our readings will cover the main theoretical paradigms that have defined the field of literary criticism since the mid-20th century: new criticism, deconstruction, postmodernism, new historicism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, sociology of literature, race and gender studies, and postcolonial theory. We will focus on the canonical theoretical foundations of the discipline, but by the end of the semester, we will also explore more recent and influential paradigms, such as environmental humanities, digital humanities, new media theory, post-humanism, and post-criticism. Evaluation will consist of a single final paper and regular class participation is required.

ENG 890T.01 TUTORIAL IN SPEC TOP: **DISSERTATION WORKSHOP**

Kathy Psomiades

ENG 890T.02 TUTORIAL IN SPEC TOP: **JOB MARKET WORKSHOP**

Aarthi Vadde

NON-ENGLISH COURSES THAT MAY BE OF INTEREST TO ENGLISH GRAD STUDENTS

ENGL 590S-4-03 Fall 2025
SP Topics: Criticism/Theory/Methodology (Seminar) Early Jameson
Ranjana Khanna
Wednesdays 8:30-11:00am

Versions of Charity and its Impediments:
Thomas Aquinas, William Langland, and Corpus Christi in the Later Middle Ages
Fall 2025
ENG890S/XIANTHEO890
Professor David Aers

In this course we will explore the theological virtue of *Charity*. We will study three medieval versions of charity and its impediments across widely different genres. As the title indicates, I want us to consider both the forms this virtue takes and the specific impediments each writer considers. This means we will be thinking about charity as a form of life in specific communities (church, polity, society) with their own impediments to the virtue, their own habitual sins. For both Aquinas and Langland, *Charity* shapes our understanding of sin's effects on the individual person and the community. For both Aquinas and Langland, the Incarnation is the eminent and decisive expression of God's Love. And so it is for the feast of Corpus Christi and its plays performed in medieval York.

We set out with the innovative, dazzling account of Charity offered by Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* II-II.23–46. You should have read this BEFORE the first class. We will begin our exploration of Aquinas's teaching by considering his "modi loquendi," the way he leads us to understanding through a dialectical account of arguments against the positions he favors. His modes of writing are inseparable from what he teaches, just as they are for poets like Langland and the Corpus Christi plays. We will also need to think about what virtues, habits and vices are in Aquinas's *Summa* and the place of the teaching on Charity within the whole work, especially in relation to Faith and Hope. We will certainly conclude our study of Aquinas by some consideration of Part III, the Life of Christ and the Sacraments. You will want to read Aquinas in one of the parallel-text (Latin/English) editions.

From Aquinas we will jump over a hundred years to Langland's great poem, *Piers Plowman*, in which the exploration of Charity (Deus Caritas, as Holy Church proclaims in Passus I) and the impediments to Charity are central. This is a demanding allegorical, dialectic, and visionary poem which I hope to introduce carefully to those unfamiliar with it, as well as introducing some of the differences between the contexts of Aquinas and Langland, writing in late 14th century England during the Great Schism. If you have not studied Middle English, read the poem in an excellent modern translation by George Economou, William Langland's *Piers Plowman: The C Version* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, paperback). We will be studying the final version of the poem, known as the "C Version," and this is edited in a superbly but simply annotated version by Derek Pearsall: *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-Text* (2nd edition, Liverpool University Press/Exeter University Press, 2008, paperback). Even if you are reading the poem in Economou's translation, you will find it well worth reading this alongside Pearsall's edition because of its thorough "Introduction" and annotations. Langland's *Piers Plowman* explores a very wide range of issues, showing the scope of charity in medieval Christianity: from "Deus Caritas" to vexed questions concerning almsgiving, mendicancy, and the treatment of the working poor. Above all, the poem is an extraordinary search for Charity: a contemplative, satirical, allegorical, and visionary search deploying Scripture and shaped by the liturgy from Passus XVIII.

We conclude the course with an exploration of Corpus Christi. Aquinas wrote the liturgy for this feast, and around it the later Middle Ages developed a great festival which included performance of the cycle of plays organized and performed by the laity, particularly urban guilds (hence "mystery" plays). We will read the York version of these in a selection edited by Richard Beadle and Pamela King, *York Mystery Plays: A Selection with Modernized Spelling* (Oxford World Classics, paperback).

The best introductions to Aquinas for this course are probably the following: Mark Jordan, *Teaching Bodies*: *Moral Formation in the Summa of Thomas Aquinas* (Fordham University Press, 2016)—a superb example of how to read Aquinas's Summa, and much else; Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford University Press, 1993). He also has published an excellent guide to the Summa Theologiae: *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 2014). I urge all participants in this seminar to have read, before the first meeting, Eamon Duffy's great book on "traditional religion" and its smashing in the English Reformation, *The Stripping of the Altars*—use either the 2nd edition with a new preface (Yale University Press, 2005, paperback) or the celebratory 3rd edition recently published by Yale. For Langland, the best introduction to *Piers Plowman* remains an essay by Elizabeth Salter, "*Piers Plowman*: An Introduction," chapter 5 in the collection of her essays entitled *English and International: Studies in the Literature, Art, and Patronage of Medieval England* (ed. Pearsall and Zeeman, 1988); together with Nicolette Zeeman, *The Arts of Disruption: Allegory in Piers Plowman* (Oxford University Press, 2020). On Corpus

Christi, alongside Duffy read Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1991) and especially the extremely fine book by Sarah Beckwith: *Signifying God: Social Relations and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago University Press, 2001).

A note on class format, expectations, and grading: This class is a seminar, so attendance and participation are mandatory. Laptops (and other electronic devices) are not to be used in class, except for approved assistive technologies. A seminar is a dialogic form of learning, very different to a lecture class. In my experience, laptops act as an impediment to the kinds of attention and communication I consider essential to a flourishing seminar. Also, since we will have more than enough to chew on already, please refrain from eating during class.

The grade will come from one essay of not more than 25 pages to be handed in during or before the final class.