

Sympathy for the Devil:
The Rhetoric of Compassion

(German 385, GLITS 314, CHID 270, Philosophy 301, Comp Lit 357)

Instructor:
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“The most compassionate human is the best human.”

G. E. Lessing

“If art does not enlarge men’s sympathies, it does nothing morally...The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring human creatures.”

George Eliot

“Keep your appeal to pity short, for nothing dries more quickly than a tear when it is shed for the troubles of others.”

Cicero

Is compassion the foundation of human morality or a dangerously unreliable emotion? This course examines the strategies and motivations in different media (plays, novels, films) of fostering empathy for commonly held enemies or discriminated groups. The syllabus runs from Ancient Greece to depictions of Nazis and terrorists in modern film, and considers philosophical assessments of sympathy (positive and negative) alongside examples of its aesthetic manufacture. Half of our readings are in moral philosophy, and in each case we use the literary text or film as a kind of experimental field to test the concepts laid out by the philosophical texts, and to evaluate the philosophers’ claims about the moral efficacy of compassion. Students will also work creatively to engender sympathy in four genres (rhetoric, drama, narrative, film). Hence there are three related skills we’ll develop in the course: critical thinking; literary analysis; creative practice.

We will look into the ethical implications of using dramatic compassion to further laudable social agendas of tolerance. This line of questioning reveals the discomfiting unity of pity as a device in portrayals, for instance, of both Nazis and their victims: Is it *possible* for art works to persuade bigots to accept minorities and outcasts? Is it *right* for a film to invite sympathy for a monster like Hitler or a public menace like suicide bombers? It is vital to understand the action of sympathy before we assign it such momentous tasks as guiding our moral vision and encouraging a more tolerant society.

The syllabus runs through three units that concentrate on sympathy in a particular time period and a specific genre. After examining pity in the ancient world through the practice of rhetoric, we will concentrate on the production of sympathy especially in relation to European Jews. As perennial outsiders on the margins of society, often the victims of violent hate, Jews were both the objects and subjects of pity in artistic representations. This focus on sympathetic portrayals of one group of people will allow us to examine the claims of moral philosophers with clear, concrete, and consistent examples.

Unit 1: Rhetoric (Ancient Greece and Rome)

Unit 2: Drama & Narrative (Early Modern through 19th Century)

Unit 3: Film & Visual Media (20th – 21st Centuries)

We will engage in team-based learning in this course. For each of the three units, teams will work on projects that include both creative and analytical elements, corresponding to the artistic works and the philosophers we examine during that unit. After each unit, students will be expected to articulate the positions of the philosophers on individual and team assessment tests.

Required Texts

1. Course Packet (EZ Copy N Print on the Ave.)
2. Sophocles, *Philoctetes* (trans. Seth Schein)
3. Lessing, *Nathan the Wise* (trans. Richard Schechner)

- The course packet is available from EZ Copy N Print, 4336 University Way NE.
- The two books are available in the University Bookstore.

Films

1. "I, Borg," *Star Trek TNG*, Season 5, Ep. 23 (USA, 1992)
2. *The Merchant of Venice* (USA, 2004)
3. *M* (Germany, 1931)
4. *Downfall* (Germany, 2004)
5. *The Lives of Others* (Germany, 2006)
6. *The Bubble* (Israel, 2006)
7. *The Act of Killing* (Denmark/UK, 2012)
8. *Jojo Rabbit* (USA, 2019)

- Links to a viewing platform for these films will be provided on the course website.

Grading

ICATs (4):	25%
TCATs (4):	5%
Participation (incl. peer assessment):	10%
Discussion Report (1):	30%
Group Projects (3):	30%

Learning Goals

By the end of the quarter, you will be able to:

- Define pity, sympathy, compassion, and empathy in current usage and historically
- Describe and critique the role of sympathy in various systems of moral philosophy
- Analyze literary works as a way of exploring specific questions about sympathy
- Describe the important features of four different modes of creative production in terms of engendering sympathy: rhetoric; drama; narrative; and film
- Create and analyze your own creative examples of sympathetic portrayals in four modes: rhetorical, dramatic, narrative, and visual

Team Learning

This class adopts the approach of team-based learning. Students will join groups of 5-7 members who work together as a **cohesive learning team** throughout the quarter (teams will be formed at the beginning of the quarter to achieve a balance of skills and learning styles). Students are expected to attend each class period, have all assignments completed by the beginning of class, and be ready to engage in discussing the topic of the day. In this course, team assignments will take three main forms: discussions of readings and discussion reports (DRs); unit tests; and group projects. A fourth feature of team learning is peer evaluation.

1. ***In-class discussion of readings and discussion reports:*** During most class periods, the instructor will begin with a lecture on the assigned readings to provide background, context, and preliminary interpretive strategies. Approximately once a week, you will meet for twenty minutes with your group to engage in a seminar. The discussion will be prompted by an opening question, but the conversation can take many directions from there. One student will act as scribe, taking notes on the major claims and contentions that arise during the conversation. The position of scribe will alternate among group members so that no one has an unfair work load. There are 8 such seminars in all over the course of the quarter. Every student should act as scribe once. After class, the scribe should use her/his notes to write up a discussion report (DR) on the progress made during the group's conversation, and indicating what questions remain to be addressed. (Details about this writing assignment will be available on canvas.). Every student will turn in **one** DR during the course.
2. ***Testing:*** At the end of each unit, we will make sure students are conversant with the main philosophical ideas and literary texts that have been under discussion. Each student will take an Individual Critical/Analytical Thinking Test (I-CAT) that consists of questions about the unit's readings and lectures. Next, the same test will be re-taken by the group as a Team Critical/Analytical Thinking Test (T-CAT). Students will have the opportunity to discuss each question with their team members and deepen their learning in a consensus building process that creates cohesiveness of the learning team. Studies have shown that in 98% of all cases cohesive learning teams will outperform even the highest individual scorer. Tests will be scored by the instructors as soon as possible to assure maximum transparency and immediate feedback. We cannot allow students to take the tests before or after the scheduled day. For the purpose of your course grade, the lowest I-CAT score will be dropped. This includes zero scores due to absence.

3. **Group Projects:** For each of the three units, your group will turn in one creative project and one written analysis. Each group will be assigned a particular ‘bad guy’ character who will remain your focus for all three units. The creative project will be an attempt in the given mode (rhetoric, dramatic scene, visual art.) to present your character in a sympathetic light. Your analysis will consist of a carefully argued critique of the strategies and gestures employed in your creative project. It will also describe the dynamics of sympathy in your project according to the concepts of one of the philosophers discussed during the unit. More detailed instructions will be distributed in due time for each particular unit.
4. **Peer Assessment:** At the end of the quarter, team members are given the opportunity to evaluate one another’s contributions to the activities of the team in a peer assessment process. There will also be a mid-term peer assessment in week 4 so that students can receive feedback about their group work and improve their cooperation. This mid-term peer evaluation will not affect students’ grades.

Nota bene: teams are responsible for self-management. The instructors will not supervise student activities outside of class, or mediate in the case of differences of opinion. Team’s self-management is part of the pedagogical goals that we strive for in this class and a great modeling exercise to prepare students for real-life professional contexts.

Policies

- **ATTENDANCE:** In-class work is essential for this pedagogy (TBL). Participation is a key component of the grade.
- **Always bring your book to class!** Seminar conversations and lecture discussions will be closely tied to your (preferably marked-up and commented-on) reading of the text at hand.
- **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:** The University of Washington is a community dedicated to learning. Students belonging to the community adhere to the ethical obligations outlined in [the student conduct code](#). Plagiarism, cheating, and disruptive behavior in class violate the code, and harm everyone’s learning. Undisclosed use of Any violations of the code in connection with the course will result in referral to the university administration for appropriate action. Plagiarism of any sort will automatically result in a grade of 0.0 for the assignment, and possible referral to the University administration.
- **AI-BASED WRITING TOOLS:** The undisclosed use of AI-based tools (such as ChatGPT) is considered plagiarism. While not these tools are not forbidden, you are strongly encouraged to write without them. If you do use them, all sources—including AI tools—must be properly cited and documented. Details about this process will be provided with writing assignment descriptions. Use of AI in ways that are inconsistent with the parameters above will be considered academic misconduct and subject to investigation.

Please note that AI results can be biased and inaccurate. It is your responsibility to ensure that the information you use from AI is accurate. Additionally, pay attention to the privacy of your data. Many AI tools will incorporate and use any content you share, so be careful not to unintentionally share copyrighted materials, original work, or personal information.

- **INCLUSION COMMITMENT:** I seek to ensure all students are fully included in each course. If you find that there are aspects of course instruction, subject matter, or classroom environment that result in barriers to your inclusion, please contact your instructor (me), a departmental advisor, or the university diversity officer vpomad@uw.edu.
- **PRONOUNS:** This course affirms people of all gender expressions and gender identities. If you go by a different name than what is on the class roster, please let me know. Using correct gender pronouns is important to me, so you are encouraged to share your pronouns with me and correct me if a mistake is made. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me. For more information on pronouns, see <https://registrar.washington.edu/students/pronouns/>
- **ACCESS AND ACCOMMODATIONS:** It is crucial that all students in this class have access to the full range of learning experiences. At the University of Washington, it is the policy and practice to create inclusive and accessible learning environments consistent with federal and state law.

Full participation in this course requires the following types of engagement:

- the ability to complete 20-40 pages of reading in preparation for each class;
- the ability to attend tri-weekly lectures of 30-50 minutes with 30-50 other students;
- the ability to work in a learning team with 5-7 other students on group discussions and projects (creative and analytical);
- the ability to complete in-class written quizzes of 5-10 questions AND then to discuss the same questions in your learning team;
- the ability to write discussion reports and reflection essays.

If you anticipate or experience barriers to your learning or full participation in this course based on a physical, learning, or mental health disability, please immediately contact the instructor to discuss possible accommodation(s). A more complete description of the disability policy of the College of the Environment can be found [here](#). If you have, or think you have, a temporary or permanent disability that impacts your participation in any course, please also contact Disability Resources for Students (DRS) at: [206-543-8924](tel:206-543-8924) V / [206-543-8925](tel:206-543-8925) TDD / uwdss@uw.edu e-mail / <http://www.uw.edu/students/drs>.

Roles & Responsibilities for Academic Accommodations:

- *Student:* inform the instructor no later than the first week of the quarter of any accommodation(s) you will or may potentially require.
- *Instructor and TA:* maintain strict confidentiality of any student's disability and accommodation(s); help all students meet the learning objectives of this course.

- **RELIGIOUS ACCOMMODATIONS:** Washington state law requires that UW develop a policy for accommodation of student absences or significant hardship due to reasons of faith or conscience, or for organized religious activities. The UW's policy, including more information about how to request an accommodation, is available at Religious Accommodations Policy (<https://registrar.washington.edu/staffandfaculty/religious-accommodations-policy/>). Accommodations must be requested within the first two weeks of this course using the Religious Accommodations Request form (<https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/>).
- **GRADES GRIEVANCE POLICY:** If you disagree with the grade you have been awarded and wish to appeal your grade, you must follow the policy outlined below. We will make no exceptions to this policy, and reserve the right to refrain from considering your complaint if you do not follow the policy.
 - Wait twenty-four hours from the time you receive the grade.
 - Deliver a written statement explaining your complaint to the instructor: Prof. Wiggins (Box 353130). (No emails or telephone calls will be accepted.)
 - Make an appointment with the instructors to discuss your written complaint in person (email is fine for making an appointment).
 - We will indicate our final decision to you by email within twenty-four hours of our meeting.
 - If you disagree with our final decision, please file a written request to meet with the instructors and the Undergraduate Program Coordinator, Prof. Jason Groves.

Land Acknowledgment:

The University of Washington acknowledges the Coast Salish people of this land, the land which touches the shared waters of all tribes and bands within the Duwamish, Suquamish, Tulalip and Muckleshoot nations.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments*

Date	Reading / Viewing before class	Classtime	Due
Unit 1: Rhetoric (Ancient World)			
3.25	---	Introduction	
3.27	STNG: <i>I, Borg</i>	STNG / Terminology	
3.29	Homer, <i>The Iliad</i> 24	Homer // Group Formation	
4.1	Aristotle, <i>Rhetoric</i>	Aristotle	
4.3	Cicero, Gorgias, Aristophanes	SEMINAR 1	
4.4	Aristotle, <i>Poetics</i> ; Sophocles, <i>Philoctetes</i> (1)	Aristotle // Greek Tragedy	
4.8	Sophocles, <i>Philoctetes</i> (2)	SEMINAR 2	
4.10	Review: Sophocles	Sophocles // Group Work	
4.12	Speech Presentations	I-CAT 1 // Speeches	
Unit 2.1: Drama (Early Modern – Enlightenment)			
4.15	Bible; View: Shakespeare, <i>Merchant of Venice</i>	Unit 2 intro // Shakespeare	GP1
4.17	Read: <i>Merchant</i> , III.1, IV.1	SEMINAR 3	DR2
4.19	Spinoza, Rousseau	Spinoza // Rousseau	
4.22	Adam Smith	Smith	
4.24	Review: Spinoza, Rousseau, Smith	SEMINAR 4	
4.26	Mendelssohn/Lessing, Letters; <i>Nathan</i> (Act 1)	Mendelssohn // Lessing	DR3
4.29	Lessing, <i>Nathan the Wise</i> (Acts 2-5)	Lessing	
5.1	Review: Lessing & Mendelssohn	SEMINAR 5	
5.3	Kant	I-CAT 2.1 // Kant	DR4
Unit 2.2: Narrative (19 th Century)			
5.6	Schopenhauer	Schopenhauer	
5.8	Review: Kant, Schopenhauer	SEMINAR 6	
5.10	George Eliot	Eliot	DR5
5.13	Nietzsche	Nietzsche	
5.15	Review: Eliot, Nietzsche	SEMINAR 7	
5.17	Film: <i>M</i>	I-CAT 2.2 // Film	DR6
Unit 3: Film and Visual Media (20 th -21 st Centuries)			
5.20	Brecht	Brecht	GP2
5.22	Arendt	Arendt // Group Work	
5.24	Nussbaum	Arendt // Nussbaum	DR7
5.27	No Class: Memorial Day!		
5.29	Review: Brecht, Arendt, Nussbaum	SEMINAR 8	
5.31	Films: <i>Downfall</i> ; <i>Jojo Rabbit</i> ; <i>Bubble</i> ; <i>Lives of Others</i>	I-CAT 3 // Sequence Presentations	
6.5	FINAL PRESENTATIONS (2:30-4:20)		DR8 GP3

*Subject to change; changes will be announced in Canvas. Key: **DR**=Discussion Report; **GP**=Group Project.