

PHIL 4250-001: Tolkien and Lewis on Myth and Truth - Fall 2016 Syllabus

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Format: We will meet Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 10:30-11:20 in ENGR 204
Office Hours: Monday 12:15-1:15, Friday 11:30-12:30, or by appointment.

General Objectives of the Course

At the end of the course, you will be asked to evaluate the course's success at meeting these objectives:

- 2. Learning fundamental principles, generalizations, or theories
- 8. Developing skills in expressing oneself orally or in writing
- 11. Learning to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view.

Specific Objectives of the Course

In this course we will read what Tolkien and Lewis (and some others) have to say about myth and then we will read some of Tolkien's and Lewis' myths. In reading about myth, we will seek to understand the philosophy of myth as presented by Tolkien and Lewis, asking questions about myth and its relation to truth, symbolic language and the limits of natural reason, and the role of the imagination in belief. Then we will read some of their myths (Lord of the Rings, Narnia, Space Trilogy) to see how perennial truths about God, man, and the universe can be expressed in, and perhaps only in, myth.

This course has two main outcome goals. The first has to do with content. The task here is to understand the philosophical issues and to know what these thinkers have said and why they have said it, to evaluate whether or not they have good reasons for making their claims, and to ask about the significance of all of it for us.

The second main objective has to do with intellectual virtue ("critical thinking skills" in the shallow, contemporary parlance). The goal is to improve your ability to reason. This includes understanding a difficult reading, reflecting and thinking clearly and rigorously on its truth and significance, and the ability to communicate your understanding and thoughts to others clearly and concisely.

It is the hope of the instructor that students leave the class with an understanding of the philosophical issues as well as with an enlarged sense of wonder and curiosity with respect to those issues. But it is also a hope that students leave the class having cultivated intellectual virtues such as wonder, intelligence, "attunement" (an ability to enter other minds to see what they have to offer), equanimity, studiousness, clarity, rigor, and reasonability.

Required Texts

- Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*
- G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*
- C.S. Lewis, *Abolition of Man*
- C.S. Lewis, *Discarded Image*
- C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*
- C.S. Lewis, *On Stories & Other Essays ...*
- C.S. Lewis, *Lion, Witch and the Wardrobe*
- C.S. Lewis, *Magician's Nephew*
- C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*
- C.S. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*
- J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*
- J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion 2nd ed*
- J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader*

Required Work

*Note: Failure to submit any assignment will constitute a sufficient though not necessary condition for failing the course *

- Reading Questions / Reflections (20% of course grade): I expect that you will submit, via Canvas, answers to daily reading questions / reflections for each day they are assigned (see the course schedule). These will be checked to see if a complete and adequate submission was turned in on time.
 - Reading Questions: For all non-literature readings (up through *On Fairy Stories*), do Reading Questions. Reading Questions are due by the beginning of class and will be submitted on Canvas. Late submissions will not be accepted. I will provide a detailed description of the assignment in another handout. In brief, each reading reflection should provide a substantive answer to the following four questions:
 - (1) What was the reading about as a whole?
 - (2) What was said in detail, and how?
 - (3) Is what was said true, in whole or in part?
 - (4) What of it?

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- Reading Reflections: For all literature readings (beginning with *Magician's Nephew*) to the end of the course, do Reading Reflections. Reading Reflections are due by the beginning of class and will be submitted on Canvas. Late submissions will not be accepted. Your daily reflection should concern the stated theme or topic for the day (see schedule). State a thesis and then provide a brief defense of the thesis (rooted in the text, ideally in specific passages). Alternatively, you could raise a questions and give it some thoughtful consideration, again firmly rooted in the relevant texts. Focus on the assigned reading and topic for the day, but feel free to connect the reading to other readings we have discussed. Do not summarize and have a thesis with a relatively narrow focus (even if that means you are focusing on just one relatively small part of the reading in your reflection). Reflections cannot be longer than 2 double spaced pages, but should be at least 1 page.
- I do not want you to rely on secondary sources as the Reading Questions / Reflections are meant to be the outcome of your engagement with the primary text. Evidence that you have used outside (including online) sources will be considered cheating.
- These will be graded (adequate/inadequate on a 0 to 1 scale) and a Reading Question / Reflection grade given based on your percentage of received/possible points. Since I know things come up, I have set the grade scale so that a student can miss up some number of these (assuming they complete the ones they do submit adequately) and still get an A. The grade scale for these is as follows:
 - 89% or more = A 86-88% = A-
 - 82-85% = B+ 79-81% = B 75-78% = B-
 - 72-74% = C+ 68-71% = C 65-67% = C-
 - 62-64% = D 61 and lower = F
- Grade Reading Questions / Reflections (60% of course grade): Some number of your Reading Questions / Reflections will be selected for more careful grading. See the Course Schedule for the Reading Questions / Reflections that will be graded along with being checked for a complete and adequate submission.
- Final Paper (20% of course grade): This will be a mid-length paper asking you to demonstrate both an understanding of course concepts as well as sustained personal reflection on those concepts. Assignment information will be distributed on Canvas. See the course schedule for assignment distribution and submission dates.
- Attendance and Participation: I expect that you will attend class every session, missing only very rarely if at all. I also expect regular, informed, and thoughtful contributions to class discussion. This is a basic expectation of the course. Cases of habitual absenteeism (missing more than 2 weeks of class) or habitual failure to participate in class will be considered, at the discretion of the instructor, sufficient conditions for consequences ranging from modest course grade reductions to outright failure in the course.

Note on Grades: Aristotle correctly notes that, “precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions.” It is my view that papers do not admit of the same level of grading precision as, say, multiple choice exams. As such, I grade using letter grades rather than points. However, there is a value for both students and professors to express grades in numerical form. So while I use letter grades, I will give percentages as numerical place holders. ‘A’s are 95%, ‘A-’s 91%, ‘B+’s 88%, ‘B’s 85%, etc. *I do not negotiate on the percentage grade* (say, entertain an argument for an 86% instead of an 85% on a paper). Course grades are then based on the following scale:

- 93-100 = A 90-92 = A- 87-89 = B+ 83-86 = B 80-82 = B-
- 77-79 = C+ 73-76 = C 70-72 = C- 67-69 = D+ 63-66 = D 62 and lower = F

Canvas

Canvas is a user friendly (even for people like me with limited digital competency) web-based course management program. I encourage you to thoroughly explore Canvas on your own so you are familiar with its features. Keep in mind - it is ***your responsibility*** to make sure you understand how to access course information and submit Canvas administered assignments. Go to canvas.usu.edu to see various tutorials as well as to log in using your A# and Banner password. Make sure you properly set up your notification preferences (see tutorials) so that you receive with regularity any class announcements or messages. If you have problems logging in or other technical difficulties, please do not contact me - I am a philosophy professor, not an IT guy. If technical problems persist, call the USU Help Desk (797-HELP).

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Policies

1. Syllabus/Schedule changes: The syllabus and schedule are subject to change. I will notify the class of any and all changes. In the event of a discrepancy between this syllabus/schedule and Canvas (the Canvas syllabus or calendar), *the information on Canvas will take precedence.*
2. Unless otherwise indicated, my policy with late work is that it will be accepted only with a reasonable excuse (of which I am the judge). Expect the criteria for “reasonable” to be quite high (like a hospital-worthy illness).
3. If you have a disability or any circumstance that requires any sort of special consideration, please come and see me as soon as possible so you can be accommodated.
4. University regulations are enforced concerning any kind of dishonesty. Of note, the USU Academic Policies defines plagiarism as: “representing, by paraphrase or direct quotation, the published or unpublished work of another person as one’s own in any academic exercise or activity without full and clear acknowledgment” If I suspect plagiarism on an assignment, due to style or content, I will tell you so and challenge you. If you admit it, the assignment receives a zero and that is all. If you deny the charge and I can prove the charge is true, you get not only a zero for the assignment but will fail the course and will be reported to the Dean’s Office.
5. Though not all grammatical errors will be corrected, I do have a guiding policy on these: Any page of a paper that has two or more errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. will result in a loss of $\frac{1}{3}$ of a letter grade. This effect will be cumulative, so three pages with two or more errors will result in a full letter grade penalty.
6. Technology policy: Students today have incredible access to information. But do they know what to do with all of that information, can they summarize it and then synthesize it into understanding? Can they communicate it clearly? Can they mentally juggle the various streams of content with any clarity? Many students think they can “multitask”, but studies suggest that multitasking just means doing multiple things poorly at the same time. Studies also show that students retain more information when they take notes with a pen and paper rather than on an electronic device. I want you to be present in class and in the best position to learn. *So all electronic devices (phones, tablets, laptops, etc) are prohibited in my classroom.* No pictures of the board, no audio or video recording, no taking notes on any electronic device. Rare exceptions will be made only if you ask the instructor for an exemption. If you wish to have notes on a computer, it is a very good idea to rewrite your notes a few hours after class.
7. If I demonstrate a lack of attentiveness in class (I fall asleep, text message, play minesweeper, etc.) you may kick me out of class. I reserve the right to do the same to you.

Advice and some information on the “culture” of my courses

1. No one has a “right” to a “good” grade. No one gets extra credit for “effort,” which is invisible.
2. Please feel free to ask any question about anything at any time, in or out of class; that’s what philosophy is.
3. Expect to be challenged, to work, to find some of the course material “over your head” at first. If it isn’t, you can’t move up, only sideways.
4. I expect around 2 hours of out-of-class time for every hour of class time, though depending on your reading speed and focus that may be more or less. This is why taking 5 classes makes you a “full-time” student: $(5 \times 3 \text{ class hours}) + (5 \times 6 \text{ study hours}) = 45 \text{ hours a week}$. This is actually a federal standard. The DOE federal guidelines define one credit hour as “one hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out of class student work” (34 CFR-Part 600.2). Classes that ask less than this are not giving you your money’s worth. Don’t pine for easier classes; don’t envy your friends who are in less demanding courses. Rather, do yourself a favor and demand that your professors demand more of you.
5. Not a policy matter but of great importance for getting good grades: All studies show that the single most accurate predictor of grades is this: the more TV, the lower the grades; the less TV, the higher.

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6. Another important good grade producer is scheduling, time management. Specifically, don't cram, do work ahead of time. And work first, then play – you get in more of both that way.
7. Students today are incredibly distracted - text messages, cell phones, social media, game consoles, glowing screens everywhere. While many celebrate these new technologies and even perceive themselves to be dependent on them, studies show that these gadgets and glowing screens are making us dumber. One study found that students who are distracted by gadgets scored 20% lower on cognitive tests. Another study found that typical students can focus for less than 2 minutes before being distracted. Don't become a slave to a tool. When you study: shut down your email, turn off your phone, shut down your computer or at least disable the internet. You will be a better student and a wiser person for it. Remember what most social media interactions amount to: the ability to express every idea you have except the ones that are well thought through.
8. I will assume everyone has done the reading BEFORE the class during which we go over it (otherwise half of what goes on in class passes you by). Also, bring your text to class.
9. Do not be afraid to argue with me. I do not raise your grade for agreeing with me and my favorite philosophers or lower it for disagreeing.
10. Logistical and educational point: Email has made for considerably easier communication between students and teachers. However, the medium can be abused. I prefer that you raise questions in class or come to my office hours when you have questions. It is beneficial for you too – the human contact allows for a more intimate and natural mode of discourse, and it is my belief that students learn more from dialogue than from monologue (which is the necessary form of email).
11. How we dress matters since our dress is a visible sign that we recognize the appropriate dignity and seriousness of whatever activity it is we are engaged in. Getting an education is a more dignified activity than lounging around with your friends, so your dress should suggest as much. So I encourage students to dress in a way that is proportionate to the dignity of a university education. In addition, there is something to that old saw that you should “dress for success.” Though there is a well-established and timeless costume of the college student, I make no specific recommendations.
12. Many problems in philosophy are really problems in English communication. If you cannot communicate what you are thinking clearly, no one can know what you think. What to do about it? Read great books. Learn how to write by imitation.
13. A word about the philosophical temperament. Aquinas defines the virtue of studiousness as the “keen application of the mind to something”. Philosophers are among the most studious of people in this sense - they seek to clarify terms and propositions, and then follow the arguments wherever they go. This entails a great trust in reason, trusting that the *logos* will not steer you astray. Development of this studious capacity to keenly apply the mind to something is one mark of being an educated person. This capacity allows a person to engage people and ideas of all stripes, rather than being confined to one's own thoughts. As Aristotle says, “It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.” This habit of mind is useful in all walks of life (business, family, etc). But this habit of mind also means you can expect me to push ideas and arguments to explore them and to challenge students, an exercise that may make some students feel uncomfortable.

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Philosophy Department Grading Guidelines

A or A-

The essay is **excellent**. The writing is clear and concise, using proper sentence structure, grammar, and spelling. The essay stays firmly on topic. The writer has accurately and thoroughly described the relevant philosophical positions and arguments. The essay demonstrates that the student has engaged the topic with intellectual curiosity and seriousness, going beyond classroom discussions and readings, and demonstrating a thorough understanding of the material.

B+

The essay is **very good**. The writing is clear and concise, using proper sentence structure, grammar, and spelling. The essay stays firmly on topic. The writer has accurately described the relevant philosophical positions and arguments, except perhaps with a few very minor errors, omissions, or some lack of thoroughness of explanation. The essay shows intellectual engagement with the topic, but there is little in the essay which goes beyond classroom discussions and readings.

B or B-

The essay is **good**. The writing is clear and concise, using proper sentence structure, grammar, and spelling. The essay stays on topic. The writer has provided a broadly accurate account of the relevant philosophical positions and arguments. There are some errors or omissions, but they do not detract from the central aim of the essay. There is little in the essay which goes beyond classroom discussions and readings.

C+ or C or C-

The essay is **adequate** in meeting the assignment's requirements. The writing is generally clear and is acceptable in terms of grammar, spelling, and sentence structure, though there are errors or the writing is at times awkward and confusing. The writer has provided an adequate account of relevant philosophical positions and arguments, but with some important errors or omissions. Perhaps the essay wanders from the topic, introducing needless examples or pursuing tangents.

D+ or D

This essay is **not adequate** in quality. The writing is frequently awkward and confusing, with serious problems in spelling, grammar, and sentence structure. It is not clear that the writer has grasped the relevant philosophical positions or arguments, though there may be hints of some minimally adequate understanding of some relevant material. The organization of the essay is unclear, or nonexistent. Nevertheless, it is clear that some attempt has been made to meet the assignment's requirements; but the result does not demonstrate an adequate mastery of the material.

F

This essay is a **failure**. Writing errors abound, and there is no indication of an understanding of the material, or even that any serious effort has been made.