

500 Wilcox Street

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[www.stfrancis.edu](http://www.stfrancis.edu)

**Course: ENGL 494B—CRN 20240—Special Topics: Dante’s *Commedia***

Semester: Spring, 2017

Time: MW 12:30-1:45

Location: LG-6



**Prerequisite: ENGL200 or equivalent.**

**Materials:** Dante. *Vita Nuova*. Trans. Mark Musa. Oxford: Oxford UP 2008.

————. *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. and trans. Steven Botterill.   
 Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. (On Canvas)

————. *The Divine Comedy, 1: Inferno*, trans. John D. Sinclair.   
 Oxford: Oxford UP, 1961.

————. *The Divine Comedy, 2: Purgatorio*, trans. John D. Sinclair.   
 Oxford: Oxford UP, 1961.

————. *The Divine Comedy, 3: Paradiso*, trans. John D. Sinclair.   
 Oxford: Oxford UP, 1961.

————. “Epistle to Cangrande,” in *Medieval Literary Theory and   
 Criticism, c. 1100-c.1375: The Commentary Tradition*, eds. A. J.   
 Minnis and A. B. Scott. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988. (On Canvas)

Eliot, T. S. “Dante,” in *Selected Essays*, London: Faber and Faber, 1999.   
 (On Canvas)

Lacan, Jacques. Chapter 11, “Courtly love as anamorphosis,” of *Seminar   
 VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*. Trans. Dennis   
 Porter. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997. (On Canvas)

Žižek, Slavoj. “Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing,” in *The Metastases of   
 Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*. New York:   
 Verso P, 1994.

**Professor: Dr. Kevin Andrew Spicer**

**Assistant Professor**

Office: S-306

Office Hours: MW: 8-9; F: 8-9, 12:15-1:30 and by appt.

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*As a Catholic university rooted in the liberal arts, we are a welcoming community of learners challenged by Franciscan values and charism, engaged in a continuous pursuit of knowledge, faith, wisdom, and justice, and ever mindful of a tradition that emphasizes reverence for creation, compassion, and peacemaking. We strive for academic excellence in all programs, preparing women and men to contribute to the world through service and leadership.*

**Course Description from the USF Catalog:**

“Topics” is a title given to a course which covers specific themes, practices, and subject content not currently offered in the curriculum. This course is directed primarily to student majoring in the subject area and could be used to complete major requirements. The course will provide an in-depth study of a specific topic. Prerequisite: ENGL 200 or equivalent. This course fulfills the seminar requirement, and depending on course content may also fulfill area, period, and genre requirements. This course meets a literature seminar requirement.

**Extended Course Description of this Seminar:**

In this seminar, our main focus will be the life and work of Dante Alighieri—author of one of the greatest poems in the Western world, *The Divine Comedy* (although this wasn’t what Dante called it, as it was first printed under this title in 1555). We will want to familiarize ourselves not just with his historical context, but with as many of the other contexts in which Dante lived and wrote: social, political, economic, literary, philosophical, theological, etc. Dante’s work is typical of the medieval period, to be sure—fundamentally encyclopedic in nature, everything in the world—from the tiniest spark of human passion to the birds in the sky and the planets in their harmonious spherical motions—all must be placed within a proper wholeness and totality. Attempting to read such a work here in the 21st century—which has itself been thoroughly influenced by theoretical readings that question the legitimacy of such all-encompassing and totalizing narratives—will no doubt be difficult for us. Despite this major obstacle—and largely for inquisitive and interested readers—we will not shy away from what we have gained from the theoretical schools of psychoanalysis and deconstruction—we will, instead, utilize them to see if we cannot come to a deeper understanding of the theological, philosophical, and literary power that Dante’s great poem might exercise on us here today. Selections from French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s work on the courtly love tradition in *Seminar VII* in addition to his masterful reading of Plato’s *Symposium* (a text exceedingly important for conceptions of love and love poetry in the West) in *Seminar VIII* will theoretically buttress our readings of both the early and late work of Dante). Aesthetics, ethics, theology, epistemology—all of these find their places within Dante’s grand vision: we’ll be on the scent of hunting down the lay of the land, as it were, hopefully covering what Dante’s poem can still teach us about love, poetry, aesthetics, God, desire, and everything else under the sun—not to mention tracing out the genealogies and historical trajectories of all these different things.

In terms of texts and readings, our semester will begin with a pair of somewhat “minor” works by Dante: the *Vita nuova* (which gives us not only Beatrice but Dante’s incredibly unique poetic voice within what came to be called the *dolce stil nuova* [the “sweet new style”]—this work spawned so many still-contemporary conceptions of love and desire that students will undoubtedly feel right at home even within this 13th Century text) and selections from his treatise on language, *De vulgari eloquentia* (which we will utilize to help us understand Dante’s own conceptions of vernacular language vis-à-vis the “official” Latin tongue of the Christian tradition [this text has by far one of the most intriguing treatments of the Biblical “Tower of Babel” story in all of Western literature]). After this we will spend the remainder of the semester working through Dante’s *Commedia*—all three works: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*.

Given the exhaustive and all-encompassing nature of Dante’s work, students of all different fields are encouraged and welcomed—there will be history for early modern buffs; political science will be amply represented as 13th Century Italian politics was a hoot in and of itself; philosophy and theology students will have so much to discuss it boggles the mind; and, last but not least, lovers of poetry and literature will be kept very busy while ideally feeling comfortable with and amongst the other disciplines.

**Course Objectives/Outcomes (Faculty-Generated):**[[1]](#footnote-1)**,** [[2]](#footnote-2)

**By the end of the course, students will be able to:**

1. demonstrate thorough familiarity with Dante’s *Vita nuova* and *Commedia*—which means understanding the texts that influenced his work (Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Augustine’s *Confessions* being perhaps the most prominent—excluding, of course, the Bible itself);
2. show awareness of the socio-politico-theologico-economical contexts of the 13th century that influenced Dante’s work;
3. make connections between Dante’s works and other authors, time periods, genres, etc.—with especial focus on relationships and connections with the world today in the 21st century;
4. apply theoretical knowledge (garnered from ENGL400) to the work of Dante (for those yet to take this course, Dr. Spicer will often provide theoretical paradigms in class; these can also be utilized by students whose theoretical background is not yet as extensive as others);
5. begin, or continue to improve, their ability to closely read and analyze literary texts; in other words, develop and cultivate a sensitivity to and awareness of the machinery of language (word choice, rhetorical trope, polysemia of language, etc); one will see this goal in action through a number of different avenues or “skills”:
   1. by directly citing the text being read;
   2. by tarrying over key passages that require some degree of interpretation/response;
   3. by demonstrating an awareness that passages are *made relevant* through a reader’s close attention to these passages (in other, there is no such thing as an *a priori* relevant passage:  “relevance” is *made*, not necessarily self-evidently discovered.

**Course Objectives/Outcomes (Student-Generated):**[[3]](#footnote-3)

**By the end of the course, students will be able to:**

**Course Requirements:**

**Students will be expected to complete all of the following:**

1. **Weekly Discussion Board Posts:** Your personal response to the reading for that week. It should be 1-2 pages single-spaced in length. **These are not formal papers** and will not be graded on the quality of the writing. They are meant to encourage you to think deeply about what you read and to explore interesting ideas. (They will be due every Friday so that we can use them for discussion purposes—feel free also to use them to respond to each other as well.)
2. **3 Standard “Close-Readings” of Dante’s 3 “canticles” within the *Commedia* (each reading should be 5-7 pages in length—double-spaced):** Exactly like it sounds—no great frills or spectacles—just close readings that have an argument to them. In other words, in these essays, ***you have to make a critical or analytical point***; it is not an OpEd piece; is not a summary; it is not a personal reflection on your impressions of the work you are investigating. It is a *close* reading of the poems that shows how attentive you are to the very *stuff*—i.e. the language—of said poems.[[4]](#footnote-4)
3. **Class Presentations:**
   1. **A Canto Presentation (can be done in a group or totally solo):** Just like it sounds. Students will compose and present to the class an analysis/interpretation/guide/lead discussion on a particular canto of the *Commedia*. Try to prepare some kind of list of questions that can be distributed to everyone in the class. These will be done on Wednesdays.
   2. Final Project Presentation in Week 15—details will be available on Canvas.
4. **Class Participation** (see “Attendance Policy” *infra*).
5. **A Final Summative Paper on the Seminar as a Whole:** guidelines will be available on Canvas—the goal of this project will be to try to trace out Dante’s enormous influences on other texts and thinkers.

**Course Schedule/Outline and Reading Schedule:**[[5]](#footnote-5)

WEEK 1 (1/9)—MW: Course Introduction and theoretical foundation-laying

WEEK 2 (1/16)—No class on Monday for MLK Day. W: *Vita Nuova*.

WEEK 3 (1/23)—*Inferno* 1-10

WEEK 4 (1/30)—*Inferno* 11-20

WEEK 5 (2/6)—*Inferno* 21-34

WEEK 6 (2/13)—*Inferno* Debriefing and Paper Workshop Week

WEEK 7 (2/20)—*Purgatorio* 1-10

WEEK 8 (2/27)—*Purgatorio* 11-20

(3/6-3/10)—SPRING BREAK—NO CLASSES!!!!!

WEEK 9 (3/13)—*Purgatorio* 21-33

WEEK 10 (3/20)—*Purgatorio* Debriefing and Paper Workshop Week

WEEK 11 (3/27)—*Paradiso* 1-10

WEEK 12 (4/3)—*Paradiso* 11-20

WEEK 13 (4/10)—*Paradiso* 21-33

WEEK 14 (4/17)—*Paradiso* Debriefing Week

WEEK 15 (4/24)—Class Presentation on Final Summative Project Week

WEEK 16: (5/1-5/4)—FINAL EXAM WEEK!!!!!

**Methods of Evaluation:**

See “Course Requirements” Section *supra*. Only *Nota bene* here is the policy on “late work”: “Late work will lose a point for each day that it is late. After one week, the work is a zero. In-class work will not be accepted late.”

**E-Mail Policy:**

E-mails sent to me should show a degree of professional courtesy and decorum. E-mails that demonstrate this will/should have the following:

1. A proper mode of address—“Dear Professor Spicer”
2. Your course section, time the class meets, etc.
3. A proper closing, “Sincerely, Jane Doe”.

Once we get to know each other a little bit more informally, e-mails need not be composed so formally. Until then, I will not respond to any e-mails that do not follow the format above.

**Academic Integrity:**

Academic integrity requires that all academic work be wholly the product of an identified individual or individuals. Collaboration is only acceptable when it is explicitly acknowledged. Ethical conduct is the obligation of every member of the University community, and breaches of academic integrity constitute serious offenses. Since a lack of integrity hinders the student’s academic development, it cannot be tolerated under any circumstances. Violations include but are not limited to: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, and denying others access to information or material. See USF Catalog for further clarification and information on grievance procedures.

**American Disability Act:**

The University of St. Francis is committed to ensuring the full participation of all students in its programs, regardless of the course format. If you have a documented disability and need a reasonable accommodation to participate in this course, complete course requirements, or benefit from the University’s programs or services, please contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) as soon as possible at 815-740-3204. The Office of Disability Services is located on the second floor of the LaVerne and Dorothy Brown Library building room L214. Consultations are also available please contact ODS for an appointment.

**Attendance Policy:**

As per the “Course Requirements” section above, participation in class is a part of your final grade; if you are not in class, you obviously cannot participate. Moreover, giving your participation in class a grade does assume that actively participating—or, on some days, simply just listening to your classmates and your instructor—does improve, increase, and augment your acquisition and grasp of the course material. And, finally, this improvement and enrichment will be true in ways that may not be assessed or evaluated in a direct way through other assignments. In other words: come to class because it will help you learn. ☺

**Academic Support Services:**

Various types of academic services offered by the Academic Resource Center (ARC) 815-740-5060 located in Room L214 in the Library. Online and distance learning students can contact ARC for appropriate resources. ARC serves students who need tutoring in many areas of study including writing and math. Library services include a number of online services and full text databases. Call the Library at 815-740-5041 for additional information.

**Academic Honesty and Integrity Statement:**

All students are expected to strictly follow the guidelines of academic integrity, which are outlined in the University Catalog. All assignments turned-in by an individual will be assumed to be that individual’s own original work. It is the responsibility of the student to inform the instructor if there are exceptions to this assumption.

***The instructor reserves the right to adjust the syllabus and class schedule***

***as circumstances may warrant during the semester.***

***Students are expected to follow all policies in the USF Catalog and Student Handbook.***

1. Note that this list is by no means exhaustive. Literature courses are notoriously difficult to provide “course objectives” for as there are as many possibilities for what one “gets out of” a text than there are readers that read it. This becomes even more palpably clear when one understands that this is itself a historical phenomenon—what Boccaccio got from reading Dante’s *Commedia* is drastically different than what T. S. Eliot got from it in the early 20th century; what Chaucer seems to have taken from Dante’s work in, say, 1379, is different from what Salvador Dali got in 1957 when he did a series of watercolors of the *Commedia*; students at 20 will not read the same text when they return to it in their 50s or 60s. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note furthermore that—assuming differentiated learning to be what we are always after—these objectives will be distinct and unique for each individual student. So, as an example, for students who are already somewhat sophisticated literary detectives and huntswomen and -men, they will love tracking and tracing down— following the scents—all the allusions that a single word or line or tercet in Dante’s works offer. For students who are not as well-versed in the work of Aristotle, Augustine, Virgil, Statius, Lucan, Ovid, et. al.; for those who do not recall or were never taught anything about King Hezekiah from Isaiah and his significance for the very first line of Dante’s *Inferno*—“Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita …”—this course will be a wonderful opportunity for students to learn. Indeed, Dante’s work seems ideally suited to producing precisely this kind of differentiated learning. For literary investigators, the density of Dante’s texts gives us no small amount of work to do. Of course, does one really need to know every line of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* that Dante read through the prisms of Aquinas’s *Summa*? Certainly not—the movement from Hell through Purgatory to Paradise can be understood as a good story without any recourse at all to obsessing about which section of Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* Dante got his definition of Christian “hope” from. Still, ideally, this course will hope to give students just a tiny taste of how insanely rich this masterpiece of medieval literature and thought truly is—even today in the 21st century. (*N.B.* See the next section below for how we will attempt to calibrate “where students are” at the beginning of the semester and then produce objectives/outcomes in order to meet them where they are through their own “student-generated outcomes.”) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The seminar group will do some KWL charts the first week of class—once this is completed, this section will be filled in fully. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For those interested in some alternative ways/assignments to demonstrate mastery of the course contents, please do not hesitate to come and discuss your thoughts with me. We can be open and flexible to other artifacts one might produce to show and demonstrate one’s learning other than through the standard stock-and-trade of the “academic paper.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For students: A completely updated and current schedule will be up on our Canvas shell for the course—always check there first. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)