**LOVE AND LITERATURE**

**FALL 2020 BC 3101**

**TR 4.10 to 5.25**

Instructor: Brian O’Keeffe

Department of French

310 Milbank Hall

Email: [bokeeffe@barnard.edu](mailto:bokeeffe@barnard.edu)

**Course Description**

What is love? In this course, we shall ask philosophy, theology, and especially literature to give us some insight into love. In that regard, the primary aim is to give an account of a number of philosophical and theological approaches to the idea of love, and relate these to selected literary texts – for the most part, texts drawn from the French tradition. We will attempt to gain some preliminary purchase on love (and its close companion, friendship) by way of a brief consideration of four important approaches to love. We will consider Jean-Luc Marion, a philosopher and Christian theologian, who takes philosophy to task for being quite capable of loving knowledge, but being rather less capable of knowing much about love ; Emmanuel Levinas, a philosopher and Talmudic scholar, who theorises the ethical relationship between the self and the other, and is moved to a lovely set of reflections on the lover’s gesture, namely the caress ; Jean-Luc Nancy, who describes the ‘shattering’ experience of love ; finally, Jacques Derrida, arguably one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century, and who, in *Politiques de l’amitié*, ranges far and wide in the philosophical canon, all the while meditating intensely on a paradoxical statement attributed to Aristotle: “O my friends, there is no friend”. At issue, as we shall see, is how love prompts philosophy and theology into thinking about three fundamental aspects of human existence: the erotic life, the ethical life, and life informed by religious faith. For there are various kinds of love, and various ways a lover might relate to the beloved: some of these ways of relating can be ethical, generous, reciprocal and trusting. But some can be self-serving, erotically selfish and narcissistic. Love, suffice it to say, provokes in philosophy and theology some of its most beautiful thoughts, but it also prompts considerable anxieties, especially if lovers choose the path of egotism and sexual libertinism. Some of these anxieties are expressed in terms of politics (is self-love a dangerous force that can disrupt the ethical and political harmonies of a well-organised society?) and some in terms of a rather tense balancing act between the defence of freedom (why ought we sacrifice our freedom and let ourselves be bound by the ‘contracts’ that so often make love a matter of moral obligation?) and the dilution of that same freedom so that love can be realised as the way in which a self accepts to live, not for himself or herself, but veritably, and unconditionally for the other.

The first literary text we will read together is a famous essay by Michel de Montaigne, “De l’amitié”, and our subsequent objective will be to pursue the dramas and dilemmas of love in connection with three texts: Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées*, which broaches the topic of love and religious faith. Then Marivaux’s *Le Jeu de l’amour et du hasard*, which explores the dilemmas of an arranged marriage. In a second section, we will seek to consider matters of love rather less in terms of the ethically generous scenarios of love freely given (and hopefully returned), but more in terms of the selfishness of self-love. The key figure here is Don Juan, he who loves so many women, but seems only to love himself. Here we will make a detour through literary and philosophical traditions that go beyond the French contexts that concern us more primarily – we will read the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard’s important analysis in *Either/Or*, and also read the work of Albert Camus, Soshana Felman, and the French feminist philosopher Sarah Kofman. Our text here will be Da Ponte’s libretto for Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, and I hope we will be able to make a class visit to see the opera in performance.

The third section takes us to the matter of love in the works of certain 20th-century French literary writers. We will read Marguerite Duras’s famous short novel, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, and try to pin down the elusive plot of this story of love, jealousy, abandonment and ‘ravishment’. We will then read Roland Barthes’s lovely, anxious, and nuanced mediation on love, namely his *Fragments d’un discours amoureux.* The final section of this course circles back to the beginning – back to philosophy in particular, in order to focus more particularly on the contemporary debate, in French theoretical contexts, concerning the matter of community. The vital question here is how we might improve, or re-envisage our social relations, and in this case, whether to seek in the idea of love a viable anchoring principle of a new, ethical community.

This class will be taught in French, and with certain exceptions, the selected texts will also be read in French. The literary texts have been chosen to reflect a wide variety of genres (essays, novels, novellas, epistolary correspondence and diaries), authorial viewpoints, gender assignations, sexual orientations, historical contexts and stylistic approaches. They have also been selected in order to introduce you to texts and writers who rarely feature on syllabi, and indeed, some writers may conceivably be quite unfamiliar to you. The hope is that you will gain a broad, but thematically focused knowledge of French literature. By the same token, because we will be making brief, but informed forays into philosophy and theology, another objective of this class is to demonstrate how one might productively relate literature to philosophy and theology, and in so doing, enter into a dialogue with some of the most important thinkers on the idea of love – Aristotle and Cicero, Kierkegaard, Kofman, Derrida, Marion, Levinas, and Nancy.

**Course requirements and prerequisites**

(a) This class is open to undergraduates only

(b) Non French majors/minors are entirely welcome!

(c) The sole prerequisite for this class is that students have successfully passed out of Intermediate French II level French (or have attained the equivalent level by means of AP examinations, etc.).

**Course assignments**

This is a literature seminar, so there will be no examinations, quizzes or tests. The homework assignments will take the form of essays to be written in response to a set of ‘essay prompts’ that I will provide you; \* There are no ‘re-writes’ for this class, but I will read and comment on preliminary drafts if you wish me to. The time-frame for submitting drafts I will discuss in more detail when the matter arises.

**Books to be purchased (at Book Culture)**

Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (Folio edition)

To save costs, the rest of the texts will be provided you as pdf files, and made available to you on Courseworks.

**Breakdown of grading percentages**

First essay assignment 25%

Second essay assignment 25%

Third essay assignment 25%

Fourth essay assignment 25%

**Statement of Learning Outcomes**

The intellectual goals of this class are as follows:

* Students will be introduced to the many ways in which the idea of love has focused complex literary, theological and philosophical considerations relating to ethics, politics, aesthetics, and religious faith.
* Students will be encouraged to discuss the matter of love, friendship and the ethical practice of communitarian solidarity in view of a wide variety of cultural and historical contexts, with due regard for questions of gender, sexual orientation, and religious faith.
* Students will be exposed to the numerous strategies literary writers adopt when engaging with the topic of love: in particular, narrative strategies, rhetorical strategies, approaches to style, and to genre.
* Students will acquire a broad, but focused knowledge of French and European literature as it relates to the idea of love, and explore less well-known literary texts and authors.
* Students will be exposed to a wide range of philosophical and theological discourses on love, and acquire a degree of familiarity with the main features of contemporary critical discussion as regards the question of ethical and non-ethical relations, the notion of community, and the relation of love to a certain politics of friendship.
* Students will learn how to deploy literary and philosophical theory in the close analysis of literary texts.
* Students will hone their French language skills as they relate to reading, and to the writing of both intellectually substantial essays, and short, synthetic reports. They will also have the opportunity to enhance their spoken French, since class discussion is an integral part of this course.

**SYLLABUS**

Introduction: Philosophies de l’amour

Jean-Luc Marion, *Le Phénomène érotique* (ch. “Le silence de l’amour”)

Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini* (ch. “Phénoménologie de l’Eros”)

Jean-Luc Nancy, *Une Pensée finie* (ch. “l’amour en éclats”)

Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l’amitié*

Montaigne: Amour et amitié

“De l’amitié”

Part 2. Pascal: Aimer Dieu

*Pensées* (+ Jean-Luc Marion, *Dieu sans l’être*)

Part 3. Marivaux: Amour et comédie

*Le Jeu de l’amour et du hasard*

Part 4: Don Juan, ou l’amour égoïste

Mozart and Da Ponte, *Don Giovanni* ; Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*

Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (ch “Le donjuanisme” )

Sarah Kofman, *Don Juan, ou, le Refus de la Dette* ; Soshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body. Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*

Part 5: Amour et Ravissement

Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*

Part 6: Ecrire l’amour

Roland Barthes, *Fragments* *d’un discours amoureux*