

USCDornsife

Department of  
English

**GESM 120 Faith and Doubt in the Secular Age**  
**Units: 4**  
**Fall 2015 – Mon/Wed 2:00–3:20**

**LVL (Leavey) 3V**

<b>Instructor</b>	Dr. Bea Sanford Russell
<b>Office Hours</b>	Mon 3:30–4:10, Wed 1:20–2:00
<b>Contact Info</b>	sanfordb@usc.edu

“The deepest, the only theme of human history ... is the conflict of skepticism with faith.”  
(Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1749 – 1832)

### **Course Description**

In this seminar we engage with experiences of faith and doubt as we read novels, poems, short stories, and other historical documents from the two hundred years since Goethe's time to ours. This period has been described as a secular era. But that doesn't mean that it moves straightforwardly from faith to doubt. Even as we trace a general rise of secular thinking, we will also use the texts we read as footholds in the flood, places from which we see religious experience flowing not simply in one direction, but also eddying, lagging, or doubling back.

The first main topic is science and religion. Are science and religion in conflict? What was it like to go in the span of a lifetime from believing that the world was 4,000 years old to believing that it was millions or billions of years older? How did writers who first encountered theories of evolution find meaning in a world that no longer seemed designed especially for humans?

The second topic is art and religion. Should artists try to achieve transcendence from a material world? If so, what would that transcendence look like? How do artists use religious imagery to create new forms of modern experience? Has art replaced religion as a field of rapture?

The third topic is society and religion. How do people find social belonging when their religious community has collapsed? How do writers talk to a God who doesn't talk back—or who maybe doesn't even exist?

### **Learning Objectives**

In this course you will learn to read actively and analytically, engaging with a variety of texts including long and short poems, novels, short stories, articles, and essays. You will develop critical writing skills through writing formal papers and a more informal reflective paper. You will learn to organize information for a larger audience through participating in class discussion and through writing a paragraph for Wikipedia relating to the themes of the course.

This course fulfills the guidelines for GE-B, Humanistic Inquiry. Religious beliefs and rituals have been a part of human experience for even longer than we have had written language, and expressions of faith and doubt have taken on new significance in a time of secular uncertainty. In this course you will learn to reflect critically and thoughtfully on cultural change. You will engage with diverse ideas of moral behavior, and will develop your own informed perspective on big questions about human purpose and living an ethical life.

### **Course Notes**

Assigned texts not included in the required books below will be posted to Blackboard.

## Required Readings

Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (1895; Oxford, 2009)

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925; Harcourt)

James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953; Vintage International, 2013)

Louise Glück, *Wild Iris* (1993)

Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (2004)

## Description and Assessment of Assignments

You will write two essays (prompts to be announced), and a short reflection paper. If you would like to write about a topic not included in the prompts, please clear it with me beforehand. Papers should be double-spaced, with one-inch margins and the equivalent of Times New Roman 12-pt. font.

You will have a group project (groups of two or three) in which you write a paragraph for Wikipedia summarizing how a text on the syllabus engages with themes of faith and doubt. As a group you will present your summary to the class.

You will have a take-home final exam.

Finally, you will be graded on participation.

## Grading Breakdown

Assignment	% of Grade
Essay One, 4–6 pp.	20
Essay Two, 4–6 pp.	20
Final Take-Home Exam	30
Reflection Paper, 2–3 pp.	10
Wikipedia Project	10
Participation	10

## Assignment Submission Policy

Essays should be turned in via email before midnight on the day they are due. Essays drop one letter grade (e.g. a “B” becomes a “C”) for each day that they are late.

## Additional Policies

*Attendance.* You are expected to attend each class. Legitimate absences (for sickness, emergency, religious holidays or other legitimate purpose) must be cleared with me beforehand in order to avoid impacting your grade. Each unexcused absence will lower your final grade by one third of a letter grade (e.g. a “B” would become a “B-“). You are also expected to be on time for each class. Multiple instances of tardiness will be counted as absences.

*Technology.* In general I do not allow the use of laptops in class; I expect you to bring your own printed-out copies of readings. If you rely on laptops because of a disability, please clear the use of a laptop with me before class.

	Topics	Readings and Homework	Due
<b>Week 1</b> 8/24  8/26	<b>Introduction.</b>	Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach" (handout in class)  George Saunders, "The Incredible Buddha Boy" Charles Taylor, "Introduction" from <i>A Secular Age</i> , pp. 1 – 20	
<b>Week 2</b> 8/31  9/2	<b>Religion &amp; Science.</b>	Charles Lyell, from <i>Principles of Geology</i> Alfred Tennyson, from <i>In Memoriam</i> , sections 34–36, 50–57, 120–124 Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship"  Charles Darwin, "Struggle for Existence," from <i>On the Origin of Species</i> Thomas Hardy, <i>Jude the Obscure</i> , Part First	
<b>Week 3</b> 9/7  9/9		LABOR DAY - NO CLASS  Thomas Hardy, <i>Jude the Obscure</i> , Part Second	
<b>Week 4</b> 9/14  9/16		Thomas Hardy, <i>Jude the Obscure</i> , Part Third  Thomas Hardy, <i>Jude the Obscure</i> , Part Fourth	
<b>Week 5</b> 9/21  9/23		Thomas Hardy, <i>Jude the Obscure</i> , Part Fifth  Thomas Hardy, <i>Jude the Obscure</i> , Part Sixth	
<b>Week 6</b> 9/28  9/30	<b>Religion &amp; Art.</b>	William Blake, <i>The Marriage of Heaven and Hell</i>  William Butler Yeats, "Leda and the Swan"; "The Magi"; "The Second Coming"; "Sailing to Byzantium" Oscar Wilde, from <i>De Profundis</i> Arthur Symons, from "The Symbolist Movement in Literature"	Essay 1 due 9/27
<b>Week 7</b> 10/5  10/7		T. S. Eliot, <i>The Waste Land</i>  Walt Whitman, from <i>Song of Myself</i> , section 24 Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning" Philip Larkin, "Church Going" Ann Drysdale, "The Word Made Flesh" Luis Omar Salinas, "Sometimes Mysteriously"	
<b>Week 8</b> 10/12  10/14		Cynthia Ozick, "The Pagan Rabbi"  Virginia Woolf, <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i> , pp. 1–64	
<b>Week 9</b> 10/19  10/21		Virginia Woolf, <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i> , pp. 64–151  Virginia Woolf, <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i> , pp. 151–194	

<b>Week 10</b> 10/26	<b>Religion &amp; Society.</b>	Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People" Tobias Wolff, "Next Door"	Essay 2 due 10/25
10/28		James Baldwin, <i>Go Tell It On the Mountain</i> , Part One	
<b>Week 11</b> 11/2		James Baldwin, <i>Go Tell It On the Mountain</i> , Part Two	
11/4		James Baldwin, <i>Go Tell It On the Mountain</i> , Part Two, cont.	
<b>Week 12</b> 11/9		James Baldwin, <i>Go Tell It On the Mountain</i> , Part Three	
11/11		Louise Glück, <i>The Wild Iris</i>	
<b>Week 13</b> 11/16		Marilynne Robinson, <i>Gilead</i> , pp. 1–91	
11/18		Marilynne Robinson, <i>Gilead</i> , pp. 91–166	
<b>Week 14</b> 11/23		Marilynne Robinson, <i>Gilead</i> , pp. 166–247	
11/25		THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY - NO CLASS	
<b>Week 15</b> 11/30	<b>Conclusion.</b>	Giuseppe Verdi, from <i>Messa da Requiem</i> Olivier Messiaen, <i>Quartet for the End of Time</i> Wordsworth, "The Solitary Reaper" John Berryman, "Dream Song 14"	Reflection Paper due 11/29
12/2		Denise Levertov, "In California: Morning, Evening, Late January" David St. John, "No Heaven" John Jeremiah Sullivan, "Upon This Rock"	
<b>FINAL</b> 12/11		Final take-home exam due Friday, December 11 by 2 pm.	

## Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

### Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards*

<https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>

This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage [sarc@usc.edu](mailto:sarc@usc.edu) describes reporting options and other resources.

### **Support Systems**

A number of USC's schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* [http://sait.usc.edu/academicssupport/centerprograms/dsp/home\\_index.html](http://sait.usc.edu/academicssupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html) provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu/> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.