

Life and Death
CORE-UA 400, Section 020
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Topic of the Course

Every person has a life to live, but what is this thing, “a life”, that every person has? To begin with, it’s just the temporally extended existence of the person, the proverbial three score and ten. But a person’s life is more than that, because it follows a natural progression of life-stages, from childhood to adolescence to middle age to senescence. And it’s even more still, since it is partly the creation of the person living it, who can plan it, evaluate it, anticipate its future, and remember its past.

We will explore these and other aspects of a person’s life through works of literature and philosophy. What makes you the same person throughout the different stages of your life? How does the passage of time color your perception of life? What makes for a good life? A meaningful life? Should you be grateful for having been born or dismayed at having to die?

Aims of the Course

Your primary aim in this course should be to explore how to live “an examined life,” in which you question what seems obvious about life, often finding that it isn’t obvious, after all. Your second aim should be to improve your skills at critical reading and writing. Your third aim is to enjoy some great works of literature and philosophy. Please note that although the course should help you to reflect on your own life, it will do so by honing your skills at interpreting and assessing works by great authors, ancient and modern. Lectures, discussions, and written assignments will be devoted to critical thinking about the texts.

In your written work, aim at clarity of reasoning and expression. You will not be graded on grammar or spelling unless they get in the way of clarity, but the assignments, being relatively short, will give you an opportunity to hone these skills as well.

As for recitations, you should see them as an opportunity to practice expressing yourself, which will improve your skills at both speaking and writing. Since some students prefer to formulate their comments before speaking up, your section leaders are encouraged to avoid always calling on “first responders”.

Readings

1/25 - 1/27: Childhood:

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Chapters 1 - 9 (NYU Classes)

2/1 - 2/17: Personal identity

Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* (bookstore)

2/22 - 3/2: The passage of time:

Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (bookstore)

3/7 - 3/9: Adolescence

Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding* (bookstore)

3/21 - 4/6: A good life

Cicero, *De Finibus*, Book 1, sections 9–21 (NYU Classes)

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books 1 & 2, Book 10, §§ 1–5 (NYU Classes)

4/11 - 4/13: Mid Life

Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice* (bookstore)

4/18 - 4/25: Old age and death

Leo Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilych” (NYU Classes)

Epicurus “Letter to Menoeceus” (NYU Classes)

4/27 - 5/4: Birth

Seanna Shiffrin, “Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm” (NYU Classes)

Writing Assignments

There will be two kinds of writing assignment. You will write four 250-word responses to works of literature in the course. You will also write four papers, of increasing length, on assigned topics.

The schedule of writing assignments is as follows:

Response 1 (Kafka)	due Sunday 1/31 5:00 pm
Paper 1 (500 words)	due Sunday 2/12 5:00 pm
Response 2 (Vonnegut)	due Sunday 2/21 5:00 pm
Paper 2 (1000 words)	due Sunday 3/06 5:00 pm
Paper 3 (1500 words)	due Sunday 4/03 5:00 pm
Response 3 (Mann)	due Sunday 4/10 5:00 pm
Response 4 (Tolstoy)	due Sunday 4/24 5:00 pm
Paper 4 (2000 words)	due Sunday 5/08 5:00 pm

Your responses and papers must consist entirely of your own words plus some quotations from the reading, which must be clearly marked as quotations. No other material is allowed.

Policies

Laptops will not be permitted in class. Research has shown that students who take notes by hand learn more and understand it better than those who type.

You will be required submit your papers via NYU Classes in MS Word or RTF format. Your papers, without your name but with the instructor's comments and the grade, will be posted on NYU Classes for everyone to read. Your taking the course counts as consent to have your work posted in this way. You will be encouraged to read other students' papers — especially the ones that will be flagged as worth reading.

Because all of the papers will be posted, you will have no opportunity to revise written work. Instead, the early assignments will count less toward your grade, so that you will feel free to take risks on them, knowing that you will have a chance to improve along the way. Extensions will be granted only by *prior* arrangement with your recitation leader.

Grading

Grades on written assignments will be awarded on a 100-point scale (95-100 = A, 90-94 = A-, 86-89 = B+, 83-85 = B, 80-82 = B-, 76-79 = C+, 73-75 = C, 70-72 = C-, ≤70 = D)

The assignments will be weighted in your final grade as follows:

Each response: 5% (x 4 = 20%)
First paper: 10%
Second paper: 15%
Third paper: 25%
Fourth paper: 30%

You must do all of the assignments. Failure to do any of them will result in an F.

Attendance at both lecture and recitation is required. You will be permitted 3 unexcused absences in all (counting recitation and lecture together). Absences will be excused only if you have notified your recitation leader by email *in advance* of the lecture or recitation that you will miss. *For every unexcused absence above 3, your final grade will be reduced by 2 points.*

Where to Find the Texts

The following texts will be available in paperback at the NYU bookstore. You may use Kindle or Nook editions *provided that they have the same ISBN number*. Texts not listed here will be available in pdf on NYU Classes (accessible through the “Academics” tab on NYU Home).

Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis: A New Translation* by Susan Bernofsky. W. W. Norton & Company (2014). ISBN: 0393347095

Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Dial Press Trade Paperback; Reissue edition (2009) ISBN: 0385333846

Carson McCullers, *Member of the Wedding*. Mariner Books; Reprint edition (2004). ISBN: 0618492399

Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*. Dover Thrift Edition ISBN-10: 0486287149.