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## The Literature and Cinema of Revenge: Honors 493 and English 492

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RUSTY RUSHTON

# The Literature and Cinema of Revenge

Honors 493 and English 492

3 Credit Hours

RUSTY RUSHTON

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM, UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

MICHAEL SLOANE, DIRECTOR

## GENERAL DESCRIPTION

This course explores the moral and aesthetic tenets of revenge passion as represented in Western literature and film. In addition to viewing such cinematic works as *The Godfather* and *Dead Man Walking*, we read Greek and Renaissance drama, passages from *The Bible*, Romantic poetry and philosophy, and essays concerned with contemporary instances of revenge. We are particularly interested in the historical shift from family- and clan-oriented societies to those based on national judicial systems, as well as in the emotional price we continue to pay in moving from the one type of satisfaction to the other.

## TEXTS

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*

Euripides, *Medea*

Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* (or *Four Revenge Tragedies*, ed Katharine Maus)

Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy & The Genealogy of Morals*

Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*

Shelley, *The Cenci*

Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

## SYLLABUS

Tue Jan 7	Introduction, handouts for discussion
Thu Jan 9	personal touches: students share their suppression, their wrath (2-page personal narratives due, to be noted w/ comments by me, but not graded)
Tue Jan 14	Shakespeare, <i>Hamlet</i> (Acts I-III)

## THE LITERATURE AND CINEMA OF REVENGE

Thu Jan 16	<i>Hamlet</i> (Acts IV–V)
Tue Jan 21	Vengeance & the Legal System (handouts, guest lawyer Richard Stockham)
Thu Jan 23	passages from <i>The</i> (Judeo-Christian) <i>Bible</i> (handout)
Mon Jan 27	showing of <i>The Godfather I</i> , 8:00 p.m. Honors House
Tue Jan 28	<i>The Godfather I</i> (film)
Thu Jan 30	Thomas Kyd, <i>The Spanish Tragedy</i>
Tue Feb 4	Aeschylus, <i>The Oresteia</i> (intro + <i>Agamemnon</i> )
Thu Feb 6	<i>The Oresteia</i> ( <i>The Libation Bearers</i> & <i>The Eumenides</i> )
Mon Feb 10	showing of <i>The Godfather II</i> , 8:00 p.m. Honors House
Tue Feb 11	<i>The Godfather II</i> (film)
Thu Feb 13	Euripides, <i>Medea</i>
Tue Feb 18	Shakespeare, <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> (Acts I–III)
Thu Feb 20	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i> (Acts IV–V)
Fri Feb 21	<b>recitation</b> in my office of Portia’s speech on mercy (IV.i.181–89) or Shylock’s on being a Jew (III.i. “He hath disgraced...humility? Revenge.”)
Mon Feb 24	showing of <i>Dead Man Walking</i> , 8:00 p.m. Honors House
Tue Feb 25	<i>Dead Man Walking</i> (film)
Thu Feb 27	Simon Weisenthal, from <i>The Murderers Among Us</i> ; Gerry Spence, “O.J.: The Last Word”; Michael Ignatieff, “Digging Up the Dead” (on Council of Truth & Reconciliation in S.A.); M. L. King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail”
Fri Feb 28	<b>first essay</b> (5–7 pages) due in my office by end of day
Mar 4–Mar 13	<b>student-groups meet w/ me</b> in my office
Tue Mar 4	Nietzsche, <i>The Genealogy of Morals</i> : Preface & First Essay
Thu Mar 6	<i>The Genealogy of Morals</i> : Second Essay (1, 11, 12, 23)
Mon Mar 10	showing of <i>Betrayal</i> , 8:00 p.m. Honors House
Tue Mar 11	Harold Pinter, <i>Betrayal</i> (film)
Thu Mar 13	Michel Foucault, from <i>Discipline and Punish</i> (handout)
Fri Mar 14	<b>revisions</b> of first essay due in my office by end of day
Tue Mar 18	group presentations on modern political situations & issues*
Thu Mar 20	group presentations (cont’)
Fri Mar 21	<b>second recitation</b> of Portia’s or Shylock’s speech, my office
Tue Mar 25	Freud, <i>Civilization and its Discontents</i> (I–IV)
Thu Mar 27	<i>Civilization and its Discontents</i> (V–VIII)
Tue Apr 8	Poe, “The Cask of Amontillado” & “The Tell-Tale Heart”; Faulkner, “Barn Burning” (all handouts)
Thu Apr 10	No Class (2-page film review due in my office by end of day)
Tue Apr 15	Percy Bysshe Shelley, <i>The Cenci</i>
Thu Apr 17	Thomas Pynchon, <i>The Crying of Lot 49</i> ( <b>reading quiz</b> )
Tue Apr 22	<i>The Crying of Lot 49</i> (cont’)
Thu Apr 24	Conclusion, wrap-up, <b>second essay</b> (10–12 pages) due by end of day

## RUSTY RUSHTON

Thu May 1,  
10:45–1:15      our **final exam**, here in the Honors House

\*possible topics for group presentations include Rwanda, Bosnia, Israel/Palestine, South Africa, Gandhi, M. L. King, the prosecution of Nazi war criminals, the American legal system, America's "war on terrorism."

### GRADES

- 20% first essay (5–7 page)
- 30% second essay (10–12)
- 20% final exam (essay style)
- 10% student group-presentations
- 5% 2-page film review
- 5% the two recitations of either Portia's or Shylock's speech
- 10% class participation (can't hurt, can help) & attendance (can't help, can hurt)

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