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Kateryna Schray

Marshall University, rudnytzk@marshall.edu

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Into the Afterlife and Back with Honors Students

KATERYNA A. R. SCHRAY
MARSHALL UNIVERSITY

One of the best and funniest student evaluations I have ever received read: “if this professor taught a course on *Hell and how to get there* I would take it.” This generous compliment sounded like a good course idea, and a year or so later, Dr. Caroline Perkins and I successfully proposed an honors seminar called “Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory in Literature and Culture.” Like other programs described in previous issues of *Honors in Practice*, the Marshall University Honors Program is built on team-taught interdisciplinary seminars—in this case Classics and English—and emphasizes student leadership and collaborative learning.

Presumably “what happens to us after we die” is one of humanity’s oldest questions. Nonetheless, we wondered about the type of student a class about life after death might attract in the millennial age. While text-oriented Baby Boomers and Generation X professors are likely to seek stories of the afterlife in classical epics and scripture, our tech-savvy Generation Y students, fans of *Twilight* and players of MMORPGs, may well have other ideas not only about where to find stories about the afterlife but about the definition of the term. Also, while the topic sounds interesting enough, the course implicitly promises to waver between eternal bliss and perpetual damnation, to acquaint students with angels as well as devils, and at some point to evoke terror; after all, we are talking about dying. Most of all, we recognized that, like other college experiences, the course might question cherished beliefs, overtly or subtly, depending not so much on our presentation of the material as on the individual student’s reaction to it. Fortunately my teaching partner skillfully wrapped up our first day’s discussion with a simple summary, which turned out to be a fitting description of our semester: “we bring the literature, you bring the culture.” We have taught “Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory in Literature and Culture” twice now, meeting once a week for two and a half hours and maintaining the momentum of the seminar during the week with postings on our web discussion board.

SETTING UP THE SEMESTER

Our first two seminar meetings were devoted to setting up the semester by broadly surveying works that address the afterlife, articulating our own cultural understanding(s) of the afterlife, and reading two stories that displace common modern western concepts of the afterlife. As a way to introduce ourselves and

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the students to one another, we asked each seminar participant to name a work that offers a glimpse of the next world. We recorded each answer on the board in a grid that reflected both genre (literature, visual arts, performing arts) and place (heaven, hell, purgatory). It became immediately clear that not everything fit neatly into a category, an important first principle for the semester. We also gave students time to free-write on their understanding of the general concepts of heaven, hell, and purgatory, and then we formally introduced the course with a PowerPoint presentation that anticipated some of their responses.

Our PowerPoint presentation began with Fra Angelico's *Christ in Limbo* (c. 1440–1445) and an Eastern Orthodox icon *Christ Enthroned in Heaven* (c. 1700). We followed these calm traditional images with the works of well-known artists: Hieronymus Bosch's creepy gothic triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1504), which depicts a surreal paradise and a sickening hell; Jan Brueghel the Younger's *Paradise* (c. 1620), the epitome of lush edenic greenery and animal life in peaceful coexistence; and an engraved illustration of a spiraling heaven from Dante's *Divine Comedy* by Gustave Doré (1832–1883). We rounded out our collection of the visual arts with two images our students would not have anticipated, a painting of *Reincarnation* in the Hindu tradition and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Blessed Damozel* (1871–79), in which a woman looks longingly down from heaven at her still-living love interest. Our first slide on the performing arts—a still shot of heaven from the film *What Dreams May Come* (1998)—picked up on this idea of someone in heaven pining for someone elsewhere. To bring in popular culture in its most familiar forms, we included a clip from the Fox cartoon *The Simpsons* (Season 5, Episode 1F04), now the longest running comedy in television history; an opening scene from the irreverent Comedy Central animated series *Southpark* (Season 10, Episode 11), as Satan plans “the biggest Halloween party ever”; and a three-minute segment of *Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998–2006), in which one of the characters hallucinates that Cher is g(G)od and that heaven is populated with scantily clad male angels. We also showed some predictable cartoons and a 2002 car commercial in which those doomed to hell have to drive minivans rather than the Hyundai Tiburon. We closed our PowerPoint presentation with Cynthia Rylant's beautifully illustrated *Cat Heaven*, a book written for children but equally appealing to adults, in which cats fly down from trees, sniff catnip in the air, and curl up in God's bed. This walking tour of high art mixed with popular culture previewed the movement of our course from traditional to modern with numerous permutations in between.

While our first seminar meeting was dedicated to *voicing* common ideas about the afterlife, our second seminar meeting revisited these ideas from a purely *visual* perspective. In a nod to our school's renewed emphasis on different learning modalities, we asked our students to construct sets of collages depicting heaven, hell, and purgatory. This hands-on exercise, low-stakes and ungraded, had the added benefit of ice-breaking among the students, who were now assigned into groups for the first unit. We supplied each group with a

packet of current popular magazines, scissors, glue sticks, and paper. Some groups coordinated their efforts and prepared a trio of collages on a common theme while others constructed three independent collages. We asked students not to label their work and to avoid the words “heaven,” “hell,” and “purgatory.” Groups had fifty minutes to complete their work, after which they taped the finished collages individually on the blackboard. Once our impromptu “gallery” was complete, the students walked around the room to see if they could determine which aspect of the afterlife was illustrated in each collage. We then reassembled the collages into trios to look for themes. Predictably, all groups chose red or black as the background for their hell and lighter colors for heaven (powder blue) and purgatory (yellow). All of the collages depicting hell vaunted grotesque or frightening images; in some cases, students reassembled ordinary photographs into disturbing compositions. Identifying the heaven collages was also fairly easy, but the images here varied widely in theme and composition. Purgatory, on the other hand, was surprisingly consistent: most groups built their collages out of pictures of watches, clocks, and calendars (images of time) or ladders and escalators (images of ascent).

Armed with the earlier discussion and our collage gallery, we completed our introduction to the seminar by reading two brief texts: Plato’s “The Myth of Er” (*The Republic* 10.614–10.621, c. 380 BC) and Robert Olen Butler’s short story “Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot” (1995/1996), the title of which summarizes the plot. Separated by more than two millennia, both works leave modern readers unsatisfied: they elude the now familiar Abrahamic beliefs but propose similarly certain models of the afterlife; they advance the concept of reincarnation but withhold the promise of any final reward; and they ascribe consequences for one’s earthly actions but do so with an unnerving sense of scale. Within this context, we set out to explore the afterlife as it appears in literature and culture.

We were in good company, of course. Odysseus, Aeneas, Innana, and Orpheus served as our first guides, followed by figures from the Bible, Dante (himself escorted by Virgil), Milton, and C. S. Lewis. As these names indicate, our core readings made giant leaps in chronology and were confined to the cultures of Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, Ancient Sumeria, Medieval Italy, and Medieval and Modern England. Our major assignment was designed to balance out the course’s largely Eurocentric nature. Early in the semester we invited students to research the afterlife beliefs of a culture not represented on our reading list and to present a summary of their findings to the class. Popular choices among our students included Japanese Shinto, Ancient Egyptian, Native North American, Native South American, Ancient Irish, Nordic, and Caribbean. While in both semesters our students chose geo-historical cultures, we would have been equally interested to see what they would do with culture in a more nuanced definition (gay culture, biker culture, blind culture, etc.).

Once they reported their findings, students met in small groups based on overlapping, related, or geographically-proximate cultures, and identified common beliefs as well as beliefs particular to each culture. Students continued to

study their selected cultures throughout the semester, with their work culminating in a final project: an anthology of ten items that best reflect that culture's afterlife beliefs selected from paintings, sculptures, architectural drawings, music, literature, prayers or rituals, photographs, ceremonial dress, and popular articles. Students introduced their collections with polished prefaces that expanded on their earlier reports to the class and described the contents of their anthologies, identifying each item and explaining its significance. We encouraged our students to think of this project as setting up a museum display introducing the general public to concepts of the afterlife central to the culture under exploration. On the last day of the semester, students put their anthologies "on exhibit" for the class and answered questions about their collections. This semester-long project built on the skills practiced in the other three formal assignments, which students completed in groups.

CRITICALLY THINKING OUR WAY INTO HELL . . .

Our three group assignments asked students to explore how a well-selected cultural artifact—a medieval play, a work of art, a modern film—reflects ideas about the afterlife. These efforts provided an ideal occasion to focus overtly on critical thinking. Like many other higher-education institutions, Marshall University is revising its general curriculum to emphasize critical thinking. At Marshall, this revision includes putting into place a new first-year seminar and formally designating specific lower level courses as "CT" (critical thinking). In this context, we attempted to incorporate new challenges in critical thinking by moving away from formal papers and inviting students to process the course materials in less academically traditional ways. In addition to requiring critical thinking, this approach drew on the related concept of multiple literacies, encouraging students to extend their talents beyond strictly writing and speaking. We introduced each unit with a hands-on, in-class group activity that anticipated the analytical skills and learning modalities to be engaged in that unit: students plotted a route through our city to stage a series of short plays as we began the medieval unit, illustrated a canto of Dante's *Inferno* with modeling clay, and sketched a storyboard for the opening minute of a film version of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In each case, my teaching partner and I were more interested in our students' creative and cooperative processes during these in-class activities than in the resulting products.

The first of our formal assignments, interpreting a medieval play, had the greatest potential for disorienting our research-paper-oriented honors students. We asked our students to process and report their understanding of the underworld as presented in "The Harrowing of Hell" (also called "The Deliverance of Souls") by designing a costume and stage for the play. Their goal was to integrate the thematic concerns of the text with the practical challenges of performance. The assignment also served as a good reminder that when it comes to drama—whether in ancient Greece or on Broadway—the text provides only part of the story.

“The Harrowing of Hell” appears in all four English Corpus Christi cycles; the version we used is part of the Wakefield Cycle. The plays in Wakefield were performed on outdoor platforms from the end of the fourteenth to the middle of the sixteenth centuries. The play cycles begin with the fall of Lucifer and end with the Last Judgment, essentially staging humanity’s entire history in the course of a single day; they were produced by various trade guilds and performed by the community.

“The Harrowing of Hell” opens as Jesus sends a light into hell to indicate His imminent arrival. The captives in hell—Adam, Eve, Isaiah, Simeon, John the Baptist, Moses, and later Daniel and David—react to this light with great joy, each making personal connections to it; Moses, for example, refers to Christ’s Transfiguration in Mark 9:2–8; Matthew 17:1–3 and Luke 9:28–36. Ribald and Beelzebub, devils in hell, react to the sounds of happiness from the captives and then to the sound of Jesus’s voice as He commands the gates of hell to open. The devils plan to drive Jesus from the gates, and Satan himself arrives demanding to know the cause of the commotion. Daniel and David tell the devils that their efforts to stop Jesus are doomed to failure. At Jesus’s commands, the gates of hell crumble, and the minor devils flee. The dialogue between Jesus and Satan briefly addresses the nature of this hell, during which it is made clear that the righteous souls of the Old Testament were not in hell because of Satan’s power but in anticipation of this moment’s glory. The play ends with Satan asking Jesus to take him as well, and, when Jesus says no, Satan asks that some souls be left behind. The captives proceed out of hell. Jesus’s rescue of souls from the underworld is mentioned in the Apostles’ Creed—“He descended into hell”—and the story itself is found in the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*. As British literary scholar David Bevington explains, “The apocryphal account of Christ’s deliverance of souls had become universally accepted in medieval Christianity because it answered an essential question: what happened to the souls of the righteous during those years of Old Testament history from Adam’s fall to the advent of Christ?” (594). Bevington describes Christ’s defeat of Satan as “appropriately comic” and Satan’s followers as “ludicrous”; “they raise the alarm in a noisy panic, shore up useless defenses against Christ’s entry, and turn on one another in an orgy of mutual recriminations” (594).

Bevington clarifies that the play “explicitly differentiates between hell as a place of eternal torment and limbo as a temporary residence for the patriarchs” (594); this distinction is the key to our students’ understanding of how to stage this play. The setting is not a place of fire and brimstone, but rather a place of waiting. Similarly, in his translated edition of *The Wakefield Mystery Plays*, Martial Rose identifies “the acting areas specified in this play [as] paradise, limbo, and hell” (544). Bevington and Rose recognize this hell as a place where souls are deprived of the vision of God. The *Catholic Catechism*, which explains the theology at work in the Corpus Christi Cycle, identifies this broad and general hell with the Hebrew concept of *Sheol* or the Greek idea of *Hades* (par. 633).

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This idea of a general holding place, a type of limbo, is easily transportable to other periods and cultures, and we posed this challenge to our students as they worked in small groups to design a costume and stage set for a modern production of this play. Groups presented their ideas in myriad ways, from small-scale sets built in packaging boxes to detailed layouts sketched out on poster boards. On the day the assignment was due, students set up their finished projects throughout the room for general viewing, after which each group had six minutes to explain its project's design and the rationale behind it. This activity then led to a discussion of the major staging concerns of the play, which remain constant between the Middle Ages and the twenty-first century: At what point does Jesus open the gates of hell? How does He do it—with force? with only a glance? How do the Old Testament figures approach Jesus when He lets them out of hell?—do they embrace Him? fall in homage before Him? How does He react? What do the characters do on stage when they have no lines?

Our students set their plays in modern periods in the U.S.—1960s, 1970s, present day—and various environments—prison, basement, nightclub, nursing home, big box store. The period settings had predictable features: the 1960s hell featured an upside-down peace sign and an overturned VW van surrounded with large flower petals and withered roses. One 1970s hell featured a gaudy disco ball suspended over a brightly colored dance floor dotted with sporadic flames and posters of period films. A second 1970s hell consisted of an over-accessorized basement bachelor pad decorated with kitschy patterns and mismatched fabrics. Beyond the period references, each setting advanced its own metaphor: confinement in a dimly lit jail cell, inability to advance in life, oblivion on a crowded dance floor, aimless wandering in endless aisles, lonely monotony in a common room. While all of the designs were well-executed and had significant merit, two projects stood out as exceptional.

The most impressive was the nursing home set, which captured the sense of waiting, a place not necessarily of active pain but of agonizing passivity (Figure 1). On one side, a staircase leads to a door labeled *Heaven* in rainbow letters; a trap door labeled *Hell* in red letters is located in the middle of the floor. The set itself is clearly an in-between area, a common room with tables set up for a perpetual game of bingo with impressive thoughtful details: bingo cards with no numbers, a wall clock with no hands, and a repetitive checkerboard linoleum floor that appears to go on forever. The walls of the room are decorated with portraits of Bob Barker, host of the *Price is Right* Game show (CBS 1972–2009), and the cast of the *Golden Girls* sitcom (NBC 1985–1992). Our students unanimously applauded these details on our discussion board in the days following the class, and several made personal connections to the overall concept. One student wrote: “The one that struck me the most . . . was the nursing home exhibit. This hit home with the experience of having family members in these facilities, and, along with the discussion, really made me think about identity and the hours spent in such conditions.” Another student

Figure 1: Detail from Nursing Home stage set designed by Marshall Honors students and constructed by junior ecology and evolutionary biology major Kamryn Midkiff, class of 2011.



elaborated on the symbolic value of the setting with touching personal insights: “I thought the idea of a nursing home being hell [as a waiting place in this play] was very fitting. I have been to at least six different nursing homes that I can immediately remember. Most experiences I have had in nursing homes were difficult and painful. Many people in nursing homes must sell their estate to be able to live there, and all the possessions they have left at the end of their life is what can be neatly packed away in a room that they share with someone else. This fits in perfectly with the idea of disenfranchisement after death. There is also a valid connection with the waiting/eternity aspect of a nursing home . . . getting placed in a nursing home often leads to a feeling of loss and disconnection from loved ones—like the denizens of hell [in this play] probably feel.”

Another group set the “Harrowing of Hell” in a big box store, playfully placing the various Biblical figures in appropriate sections: Eve in produce (apple), Noah in pets (ark), Moses in fish (Red Sea), St. John the Baptist in pool supplies (River Jordan), etc. Other sections of the store emphasized the heat and fire traditionally associated with hell, prominently labeled “space heaters,” “water heaters,” “fireplaces,” “stoves,” “grills,” and “saunas,” as well as fictional sections devoted entirely to “fire” and “brimstone.” In this group’s staging, an overweight Satan wears a manager’s vest and patrols the store in an electric shopping cart. His office is in the center of the store, a windowless room labeled “Security.” The store’s layout shows no bathrooms but boasts a

dental practice and an IRS office across from the check-out registers. Fittingly, the store's automatic doors are open 24/7.

Students also offered some broader reactions on our discussion board. Most of them celebrated the creative opportunities inherent in the assignment: "I was absolutely blown away by the variety of the project ideas. It was quite amazing that after the reading of one single play, it could be interpreted in so many ways." Another echoed: "I really liked the way this project allowed everyone to present designs and characters in a variety of ways. I was really impressed by the craftsmanship of the sets focusing on visual experience and the clever elements of the ones that seemed more conceptual . . . I think it's very cool that everyone was able to take such old, loaded concepts and translate them into the terms of more recent time periods while still maintaining the fundamental qualities that make these concepts what they are." Students also extended their observations to academic work in general: "Each group led me to view the play in a different light and reinforced my own belief that history and literature are about 10% fact and 90% interpretation."

. . . AND FINDING OUR WAY BACK WITH TRADITIONAL ASSIGNMENTS

Delighted as we were with our students' success in this nontraditional format, neither of us was comfortable completely abandoning time-proven classroom practices. Part of each seminar meeting was dedicated to good old-fashioned textual analysis or cross-textual comparisons. For example, when we read the underworld journeys of Odysseus and Aeneas, we asked our students to look at various modern retellings of these stories and discussed how the later texts transform the earlier ones. Students responded particularly well to Louse Glück's poem "A Myth of Devotion," which revisits the story of Hades and Persephone. If we teach this seminar again, we will likely include Rick Riordan's *The Lightning Thief*, which features a visit to the ancient Greek underworld. *The Lightning Thief* is the first of five novels in the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series, classified as children's literature but appealing to adult readers as well.

While our first assignment forewent traditional ways of reporting analysis, the two that followed—art analysis and film analysis—were mostly traditional, with critical-thinking activities relegated to warm-up exercises. As with the collages, these warm-up activities served as a way to introduce students to one another and to begin building good working relationships in anticipation of the formal assignment to follow. These assignments also gave us the opportunity to bring in skills from different disciplines and borrow basic materials from colleagues in other departments.

The art analysis assignment gave us the opportunity to assess the familiar saying, "a picture's worth a thousand words." We introduced the assignment by briefly identifying the elements of art (line, color, texture, shape, form, space, and value) and the principles of design (rhythm and movement, balance,

proportion, variety and emphasis, and harmony and unity) and then applying these terms to illustrations of Dante's *Inferno* by Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), William Blake (1757–1827), Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), and Gustave Doré (1832–1883). After this lecture and ensuing discussion, newly formed student groups were given class time to sculpt a canto of the *Inferno* that had not yet been discussed; the class then matched each sculpture to a section of the text, and the artists elaborated on their design choices and how those choices conveyed some crucial element of the poem. For their formal assignment, students were asked to find a painting or stationary work of art that claims to depict some aspect of the afterlife or underworld and to present that work to the class later in the semester. They were to identify the author, place, and time of composition; provide relevant background information; analyze the work's characterization of heaven, hell, or purgatory; elaborate on any implications or statements the artist might be making; and make connections with the class readings.

To our surprise, all of our students chose works from late medieval and early renaissance periods and, with one exception, all preferred working with hell: *Christ in Limbo* (Duccio di Buoninsegna, c. 1255–c. 1319), *Punishment of the Envious in Hell* (manuscript illustration, c. 1450–70), *Purgatory* (*Book of Hours*, 15th cent.), *Hell* (Giovanni da Modena, early 15th cent.), *The Last Judgment: the Damned in Hell* (anonymous, c. 1500), *Hell* (Herri met de Bles, c. 1540), and *Charon and the Damned* (Luca Signorelli, 1499–1504). By contrast, when we offered this seminar in 2003, our students' artworks were selected largely from the later periods: *Haywain Triptych* (Hieronymus Bosch, c. 1490–95), *The Burial of Count Orgaz* (El Greco, c.1586), *Falls of Eternal Despair* (Martin Wells Knapp, 1895), *The Emerald Throne Scene in Heaven* (Pat Marvenko Smith, 1982), *Vision of Hell* (Salvador Dali, 1962), and selections from *Barlowe's Inferno* (Wayne Douglas Barlowe, 1998). Our students successfully incorporated art values in their analyses, drawing the class's attention to warm colors and telescopic perspectives in the case of de Bles's *Hell* and symmetry and angles in Modena's *Hell*. Each group also made helpful connections to common symbolism and to our core texts: for example, the group working on Signorelli's *Charon and the Damned* demonstrated how this fresco in the Orvieto Cathedral's San Brizio Chapel is actually an illustration of Canto 3 of Dante's *Inferno*.

Analyzing works of art depicting hell and purgatory generated discussion on the use of images rather than texts to convey an idea. In contrast to the stationary visual arts, films and television programs face the additional challenge of sustaining an image for some period of time and making that image an integral element of the work. For their third group assignment, our students examined film or television programs that claim to present some aspect of the afterlife. Their task was to analyze a film's presentation of heaven, hell, and/or purgatory, select an appropriate segment of that work to show in class, demonstrate how the work furthers (or challenges) our understanding of that particular place in afterlife, and discuss it in the context of our seminar. As with the art analysis

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assignment, our first step was to acquaint our students with cinematography terms and values, and we did this through a brief PowerPoint presentation and two helpful videos available on-line. We then revisited our video clips from the first day of class and asked students to comment on the use of angles, lighting, and framing. Finally, we directed our students to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) to learn more about the films or television programs they were considering and offered a brief list of titles that looked appealing but were unlikely to be successful subjects for this assignment.

Our first group of students did the unexpected by choosing *Satan's Waitin'* (Looney Toons, 1954), a cartoon shown in theaters before the feature film; in this short, Sylvester the cat meets his end while chasing Tweety Bird but has to wait in hell's foyer while his remaining eight lives run out. Presided over by a muscular bulldog, this hell is uniquely suited for Sylvester; our students quickly made the connection with Homer Simpson's ironic and person-specific punishment in his hell, citing the scene in which he is forced to eat donuts excessively. One group worked on the hell portions of *What Dreams May Come* (1998), analyzing hell as vacillating between the massive and general and the intimate and personal; another group worked on the heaven portion, skillfully applying cinematographic values to the film's brilliant palette of saturated colors. We also had a glimpse of a serene heaven in the 1967 version of *Bedazzled* in which heaven appears as a blooming botanical garden with a large, glass-domed conservatory. Another group worked on the film *Constantine* (2005), based on a DC comic book *Hellblazer*, the story of an occult detective who travels to hell at the request of a colleague; the film reminded our students of the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, epics in which a hero receives instructions to journey into the underworld, in this case a modern, graphically violent, and grotesque hell. Another group worked on the complex film *The Fountain* (2006) which interweaves three stories—one from the past, one from the present, and one from the future—around a tree of life and the quest for eternity. The three narratives converge as an ecospheric spacecraft approaches a golden nebula containing the Mayan afterworld, Xibalba. Our last group surprised us by choosing a regional Brazilian film *O Auto da Compadecida* (2000, *A Dog's Will*), a low-budget production that one of our students came across while participating in a cultural exchange. Other films that would have worked well for this assignment include *Little Nicky* (comedy, 2000) *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey* (comedy, 1991), *Defending Your Life* (comedy/drama, 1991), and *Purgatory* (western, 1999). Films to avoid based on our previous run of the seminar are *Southpark*, *All Dogs Go to Heaven*, and *Dogma*.

DISCUSSION AND GROUPWORK

While these four assignments—the anthology and the three group projects—formed the formal part of our seminar, the remaining two components of the semester grade were probably more important and contributed more directly to the success of the course. The first of these was class participation, which

included the hands-on activities and exercises described above. The second was participation in our online discussion board, a forum we used to set the stage for our weekly meetings and to follow up on class activities. To receive credit, each post was to reflect careful consideration of the text in question, support broader observations with specific references, and be posted by the date and time specified. Students were also required to respond to a set number of their classmates' posts. In this area, students surpassed our expectations, not only in the length and frequency of their posts but also in their substance; we expected short-paragraph answers but found multi-paragraph essays. We were thrilled at the thoughtfulness behind most posts and the spirited discussion in most threads; in fact, the responses to already solid and seemingly self-contained posts often resulted in deeper exploration of the material. My teaching partner and I were careful to acknowledge each post in a timely manner but refrained from extensive commenting until the discussion was well underway.

In every unit, we asked students to react to major assignments and class activities on the discussion board. Students often assigned playful titles to these posts ("Me enjoy art?? What?!"; "I'm not going to be able to sleep for a week . . ."), took the opportunity to congratulate their classmates on especially impressive work, and sought out advice on technical glitches. The opening lines of posts suggested that we were indeed forming a learning community; for example, one student began her analysis of the week's work with "Who knew we could talk about art for 2.5 hours?" These discussion threads not only helped us gauge student interest on a weekly basis but also provided an occasion to revisit recurring themes and ideas. For example, one student wrote that the analysis of de Bles's *Hell*

was an excellent example of how culture affects the interpretation of a concept. Hell really is just that—a concept. We have no physical evidence to draw from, therefore it was interesting to see the distinct infusion of elements from the painter's culture placed there. Now that I think about it, it kind of reminds me of the collages we made early in the semester—all about interpretation!

Another student echoed:

It amazes me that each time we have a group presentation in this seminar how different the paintings or films are when compared to each other!! Who knew we'd have Sylvester and a Brazilian film and supernatural detective in just two hours!? It amazes me that most of the individuals who produce these films can use the same inspiration and come up with such vastly different ideas about the afterlife.

This comment led to a discussion of the range of the film genres that portray some aspect of the afterlife, including horror, comedy, and cartoons. One student pointed out that, no matter what their genre, "all [the films] had very

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strong ties back to the previously mentioned readings, reinforcing the influence of these literatures on our culture." Students applauded the choices made by their classmates: "just [by] choosing such different films we further clarified how open the afterlife is to an individual's own interpretation. On one hand, you have the lighthearted comedies, while on the other you have the terrifying *Constantine* and *The Fountain*." Students also mentioned the critical lenses through which they were to view the paintings and films, citing examples of symmetry, framing, angles, and lighting, and they embarked on a discussion about mass media's role in shaping cultural ideas: "Until I saw the Sylvester cartoon on Monday, I guess I didn't realize or fully think about how children in society are forming views about the afterlife so early on in life. It really shows how kids are influenced at such a young age and form ideas about such meaningful topics not only by reading, but also film (and cartoons!) as well!" The discussion list continued to be active well into the next semester.

It is evident by now that much of the work in our seminar was done in small groups. Generally speaking, students dislike group work, and gifted, ambitious students dislike it even more. Still, group work is crucial to an honors program that prioritizes leadership skills and prepares its students for the challenges that await them as they enter the workforce or continue their educations. Numerous studies and journal articles have explored group dynamics in the classroom, and even the most cursory Internet search yields hundreds of websites and discussion forums on how to succeed in group projects, some directed at faculty, most geared toward students. As our students worked with different partners on each of their three group projects, they practiced important professional skills: establishing work timelines, negotiating policies, delegating tasks, identifying individual strengths, and arriving at a consensus. Group work offers practical benefits for instructors as well, enabling us to cite specific and concrete examples for questions commonly asked on reference forms: "ability to work with others," "ability to work under pressure," "demonstrated leadership skills," and the like.

In order to make group work more palatable, we built three principles into our course design. First, we began each unit with a low-stakes group activity (collage, sculpture, storyboard) that anticipated the critical skills necessary for the upcoming assignment. Next, we set our students up for success with mini-lectures specifically addressing the challenges of each assignment, modeled the level of work we expected to see through our own collaboration, and gave our students time in class to set up a timeline for each project. Finally, we turned over a portion of the grading for each group project to our students. One of the chief objections to groupwork is the feeling of powerlessness, of being at the mercy of potentially underprepared, absent, or otherwise preoccupied classmates. To address this concern, we invited our students to participate formally in grading their own work and the work of their group members. The following explanation appeared at the bottom of each group assignment: "All group-members will receive the same grades for the first three items on this list

[variations of selecting and organizing the material, analyzing the work, presenting the project]. With input from the group for each individual for the Group Evaluation category, it is possible that the project grade might vary from person to person." The Group Evaluation category accounted for 20% of the assignment grade; we determined it by averaging all of the scores submitted for the student by his/her group members. Our groups consisted of three students; in classes where groups have five or more members, we would recommend dropping the lowest submitted score before averaging the Group Evaluation component of the project grade.

Like most good heroes, we made it back from our forays into the afterlife relatively unscathed and a little wiser. We had read about the afterlife from a variety of viewpoints, revisited familiar texts from new perspectives, and attempted to transcend cultures. Along the way, we encountered different genres and explored different academic disciplines. Despite the success of our journey, this seminar generated an even funnier student evaluation comment: "What, no field trip?"

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The author may be contacted at
rudnytzk@marshall.edu.

APPENDIX

READING SCHEDULE FOR HONORS 483

Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory in Literature and Culture

WEEK 1

Intro to course

Overview of the afterlife, from classic high culture to modern pop culture.

- In-class free-write: *What are familiar concepts of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory? Which of these abstract places holds the greatest interest for us?*
- Powerpoint survey of sample works.

WEEK 2

Plato's "Myth of Er"

Robert Olen Butler's "Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot"

- Post response on on-line discussion board by class-time: What does Robert Olen Butler imply about the afterlife in his short story "Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot?" What does the afterlife look like in the "Myth of Er?"
- In-class free-write: What questions do you have? What have you learned?
- In-class activity: collages

The Afterlife in Antiquity

WEEK 3 Classical Views of the Underworld

Homer, *Odyssey*, book 11

Vergil, *Aeneid*, book 6 (handouts)

- Post reaction to texts on online discussion board by class-time.
- In-class activity: secondary source/modern retellings exercise.

WEEK 4

Innana's Descent

Ovid's *Orpheus* (handouts)

DUE TODAY: A 2–3 page summary of the afterlife beliefs of a culture not represented on our reading list, ancient or modern. Include a "Works Cited" and document your findings in MLA format.

- Post response on on-line discussion board by class-time: What happens to identity in *Innana's Descent* and Ovid's *Orpheus*, and how does it compare to the other texts we've read?
- In-class activity: Roundtable Discussion of beliefs across cultures.

Medieval and Renaissance Views of the Afterlife

WEEK 5

“The Harrowing of Hell” (also called “The Deliverance of Souls”) (hand-out)

Introduction to the Corpus Christi Cycle Plays

Quick survey of other medieval works with references to the afterlife

- Post reaction to text on on-line discussion board by class-time.
- In-class activity: Form production companies and begin planning presentations.

WEEK 6

“**Harrowing of Hell**” presentations and discussion of the play

- Post reactions to “The Harrowing of Hell” projects by the end of this week.

WEEK 7

Dante, *The Divine Comedy, Inferno*

Introduction to elements of art and principles of design.

- Post response on on-line discussion board by class-time: In Dante’s *Inferno*, identify the canto that, in your opinion, best captures Dante’s vision of this aspect of the afterlife and explain the rationale for your choice.
- In-class activity: sculpting cantos from the *Inferno*.

WEEK 8

Dante, *The Divine Comedy, Purgatorio and Paradiso*

- Post response on online discussion board by class-time: In Dante’s *Purgatorio* or *Paradiso*, identify the canto that, in your opinion, best captures Dante’s vision of this aspect of the afterlife and explain the rationale for your choice.

The Afterlife in Modern Texts

WEEK 9

Student presentations on the Afterlife in the Visual Arts

- Post reactions to Art Presentations by the end of this week: identify something you found especially interesting in the presentations and briefly explain why.

WEEK 10

Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Books 1, 2 (Hell) & 3 (Heaven, Limbo of Fools)

Introduction to cinematographic techniques.

- Post response on online discussion board by class-time: In our readings to date, we have examined the afterlife primarily in terms of its setting. In his erudite epic *Paradise Lost*, John Milton populates Hell and Heaven with otherworldly beings, some of whom the reader expects to encounter (and has encountered in other texts), and others who are not well-known or are invented by the author. For your prompt, prepare a well-supported character sketch of any of the inhabitants of the afterlife (although technically since no one is dead yet, it's not exactly an afterlife, but you get the idea). In addition to describing the figure in detail, comment on your character's relationship to his/her/its otherworldly surroundings and significance in these opening books of *Paradise Lost*.
- In-class activity: drafting storyboards of opening minute of *Paradise Lost*.

WEEK 11

Milton, *Paradise Lost*

In class, we'll discuss the epic's portrayal of Paradise: books 4, 5 (ll. 1–135, 377–512), 8 (ll. 249–653), 9, 10, & 12 (ll. 466–648).

- Post response on online discussion board by class-time: thoughts on Paradise as it appears in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

WEEK 12

C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

Descriptions of the afterlife in collected modern texts

- Post response on online discussion board by class-time: Commentators tell us that one question Lewis considers in this work, and which was also a concern of Dante, is how or whether a deity that is essentially good can send humans to hell. Does Lewis answer this question explicitly or implicitly? Do other authors you have read address this question? Would it be a concern of Greek and Roman authors? Why or why not?

WEEK 13

Student Presentations on the Afterlife in Film

- Post reactions to Film Presentations by the end of this week: identify something you found especially interesting in the presentations and briefly explain why.

WEEK 14 Last class meeting

Anthologies due

- Roundtable Discussion: *What about our view of the afterlife has changed most dramatically over the centuries? What might account for these changes?*

Course wrap-up

Evaluations

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Our semester grade was determined as follows (from the Course Policy):

Discussion Board Posts	20%
Group Projects	45%
Play Design	15%
Art Presentation	15%
Film Presentation	15%
Anthology Project	20%
Class Participation	15%