

# LITERATURE *and* COMPOSITION 201

## Justice, Revenge, and Vengeance

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The aim of this course is to introduce students of Literature and Composition 101 to works of literature that eschew narrative sensationalism in favour of a meditation on abstract concepts pertaining to interpersonal interaction. To achieve this aim, this course will expose students to a range of texts that weave narratives around weaknesses in the United States justice system and generate dramatic conflict amongst characters who have different views of these weaknesses. By being exposed to cinematic as well as literary texts that work with these issues, students will develop an understanding of the three foremost abstract concepts of Western jurisprudence — justice, revenge, and vengeance — and the ways in which the dramatisation of various perspectives on these concepts can guide us through a reconsideration and redefinition of each of them.

### **Unit 1: Conceptual Definitions**

This unit provides students with preliminary definitions of the concepts of justice, revenge, and vengeance. Beginning with the principle of *lex talonis*, ‘an eye for an eye,’ as articulated in both the Code of Hammurabi (§192, 195-197, 200, 202, 205) and the Book of Exodus (21:12, 15, 23-25), ‘revenge’ is defined as a mode of interpersonal conflict resolution whereby a disturbance of the *status quo* incurs a response that is practically and proportionally. Moving on to a discussion of the Gospel of Matthew (5:38-39), the *habeas corpus* clauses of Magna Carta, Blackstone’s Ratio, the American Bill of Rights, and Garrow’s Law, ‘justice’ is defined as a mode of interpersonal conflict resolution whereby the response to a disturbance of the *status quo* is practically and proportionally less severe than the disturbance itself: for example, imprisonment as a punishment for the crime of murder. Finally, building off eyewitness reports of the Massacre at Glencoe (1692) and the Massacre at Wounded Knee (1890), ‘vengeance’ entails a response to a disturbance of the *status quo* that is practically and proportionally more severe than the disturbance itself: for example, the persecution and punishment of the innocent family members of a person accused of a crime.

### **Unit 2: Vigilante Justice**

Focusing on texts that dramatise the consequences of extrajudicial vigilantism gone awry, this unit develops students’ awareness of the benefits of the systematic administration of justice.

- Paul Laurence Dunbar, ‘The Lynching of Jube Benson’ (1904)
- John Steinbeck, ‘The Vigilante’ (1936)
- George Orwell, ‘Shooting an Elephant’ (1936)
- Walter van Tilburg Clark, *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1940)
- William A. Wellman (dir.), *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943)
- Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, ‘Victims believe they will be comforted by watching the deaths of their oppressors’ (2007)
- Johann Hari, ‘It may please many Iraqis, but it’s still wrong’ (2007)
- Nina Martyris, ‘Victims don’t want the US’s death penalty’ (2011)
- Peter Singer, ‘The death penalty — again’ (2011)
- Thane Rosenbaum, ‘Justice? Vengeance? You need both’ (2011)

### **Unit 3: Systematic Justice**

Focusing on texts that dramatise instances in which the systematic administration of justice is inefficient or skewed — or somehow produces an outcome that is dramatically incommensurate to the scale of a disturbance of the *status quo* — this unit encourages students to consider whether a justice system with such flaws still provides an acceptable alternative to vigilante justice.

- Franz Kafka, 'Before the Law' (1915)
- Raymond Carver, 'So Much Water So Close to Home' (1977)
- Hannah Arendt, selections from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963)
- Reginald Rose, *Twelve Angry Men* (1954)
- Sidney Lumet (dir.), *Twelve Angry Men* (1957)
- David Grann, 'Trial by Fire' (2009)
- Adam Gopnik, 'The Caging of America' (2012)
- Atul Gawande, 'Hellhole' (2009)
- Barry Graham, 'Star of Justice' (2001)
- William Finnegan, 'Sheriff Joe' (2009)

### **Unit 4: Practices Against Principles**

Focusing on texts that dramatise the failures of a justice system crippled by endemic corruption, this unit prompts students to ask whether vigilantism is capable of instituting or re-instituting the systematic administration of justice or whether it so powerfully contravenes the deliberative principles of the justice system that the systematisation of justice can never follow on from it.

- Christopher Nolan (dir.), *Batman Begins* (2005)
- Christopher Nolan (dir.), *The Dark Knight* (2008)
- Christopher Nolan (dir.), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)

### **Course Assessment**

Students taking this course must complete three 1,500-word analytical essays. Completion of each of the final three units requires one essay comparing and contrasting the representations of justice in the assigned novel or play and one of the other assigned works of literature. Where no novels or plays have been assigned for a particular unit, students must write on *all* of the assigned texts.