The Theme:
What is the relationship between literature and the basic rights of human beings? A long, intimate one about which we will learn in this course. Meanwhile, more specifically, what is literature’s theory of human rights? Its concept and approach to rights? How does literature’s position on the subject compare with those of other intellectual disciplines?

Take for instance the very influential social theory of human rights. It rests on the belief that humans are social beings, which allows them to arrive at mutually beneficial ways of relating to one another that are upheld and enforced by society. In its view, human rights are socially constructed and take the form of positive laws (laws that are enacted) and natural laws (which refer to innate rights of people by virtue of their being human as opposed to merely animal). A religious and theological approach might argue, on the other hand, that human rights derive not from human beings and society but from a supra-human authority, god; meaning that rights come from a transcendental source, divine law. It is of course possible for the supporters of social theory of rights to turn around and claim, as some have, that divine laws, so called, are really social constructions and not the result of extraterrestrial revelations. For example, what is the relationship between “Thou shalt not kill” and the NRA (National Rifle Association)? Moses and Charlton Heston, they might answer. The details are complex, but their point about the social nature of divine law is well taken.

So what then is literature’s theory of human rights? The answer will have to be deductively drawn from the various traditions of world literatures, and it points to an approach similar to social theory. Literature exists because human beings feel, think, act, and have the ability, though often not the means or the will, to chart our own destiny. Literature is a testament to this belief in human agency and self-definition, individually and collectively. Literature therefore explores life for what it is and what it might be. It explores human reality in all its physical and psychological facets, material circumstances, beliefs, desires, cultural and knowledge traditions; and it experiments with human possibility through imaginative versions of individual and social lives, as well as versions of ecologically sound (some would say spiritually sound) modes of being. Yet at the heart of all these variegated explorations and experimentations is literature’s conviction in the possibility of human flourishing (eudemonia) through human understanding and effort. It’s true that much of history might be said to have gone counter to this view, but this is also what has kept literature alive and purposeful through the millennia. Traditions of satire, opposition to, and subversion of unjust systems and the powers-that-be have sustained literature throughout the world. This is the literary legacy that a course like this one on human rights focuses on.

In short, then, literature’s imaginative engagement with human reality, agency, and potential allows for a theory of human rights based on human purpose and motivation, which, despite the differences in circumstance and orientation, may be universally expressed as the pursuit of
happiness, justice, and beauty, variously defined. This is not to assume a naïve literature-eudemonia hypothesis, because there is no automatic transfer from one to the other. It is about asserting literature’s right to narrate life and imagine a common humanity in its diversity and the possibility of the common good. This is the context in which we will be examining the relationship between literature and human rights in this course.

**Texts:**
8. Human Rights documents and information: **Recommended Online sites:**
   - The Universal Declaration of Human Rights
   - Human Rights Essentials - Human Rights Timeline
   - THE MAGNA CARTA - What are Human Rights?
     [www.humanrights.com › A BRIEF HISTORY OF HUMAN RIGHTS](http://www.humanrights.com › A BRIEF HISTORY OF HUMAN RIGHTS)

**Approach to the texts and theme:**
Literary, but from within an interdisciplinary context.
Method: Scholarly and interpretive, from within the times of the works and the present.

**Graded Assignments:**
- **Quizzes (timed)** ………………………………………… 20%
- **Reader Essays (3, each 500-1000 words)**……….. 30%
- **Exploratory paper (1500 words; due March 8)…… 20%
- **Final Paper (3000 words; due March 19)…………… 30%

1. **Quizzes (total value: 20% of course grade)**. Quizzes will be information questions. They will test your familiarity with and comprehension of the material. They will be timed, so make sure you’ve read the text before taking the quiz.
2. **Reader essays on selected readings: Value: 30%**.
Three essays, each 3-4 double-space typed pages. You will summarize the key points of the work and comment relevantly on the material. Specific prompts and instructions for each essay will follow under “Assignments.”

3. **Exploratory Paper: 20%**. Prompts and instructions will follow under “Assignments.”

4. **Paper.** Suggestions and instructions will follow. **Value: 30%**.

**Note:** There may be slight changes in the assignments as we work into the quarter.