

Honors Senior Seminar Offerings: 2019 – 2024

General Overview

While traditional in content, setting, and instructional style, a Cistercian education strives to be more than “classical.” In a few words, Cistercian education tries to be “intentionally thoughtful” about the ways it seeks to attend first and foremost to the needs of the student. The School intends to impart more than just content or experience. It hopes to provide a structure for a young man’s personal growth and a path to greater self-knowledge.

There are few periods within the Cistercian experience that call for more personal growth than senior year. The senior year is already in many ways distinct from other years because it encapsulates all of the imbued hopes and expectations of the prior years while at the same time it reaches forward and connects with the goals and growth that lie ahead. It is a time when students explore their past, present, and future – each facet of life offering avenues of insight into the others. It is a time of anticipation and natural pressure (imposed both externally and internally) coupled with elevated coursework and (hopefully) with elevated maturity and responsibility. It is a time that calls for greater reflection and conversation, for deeper friendships between classmates but also with teachers and Form Master. It is a time for navigating inevitable changes in friend and familial relationships as students forge their own paths.

It is appropriate then that seniors leave behind the elective system of prior years and enter the more serious and demanding realm of *Honors Senior Seminars*. Each student will choose an *Honors Senior Seminar* (three periods per week) with the intention of exploring that general area of study for the full academic year. These courses are intended as a substantial intellectual capstone experience. While each course has a year-long academic arc, each semester will have its own character (see below) and will be graded separately.

Honors Senior Seminar I (fall semester): While respecting necessary differences in content, style, and assessment for various academic disciplines, these courses will encourage habits of inquiry, reflection, and discussion to try to answer some of the “eternal questions” as expressed in the context of that area of study.

Honors Senior Seminar II (spring semester): While again respecting necessary differences in content, style, and assessment for various academic disciplines, these courses will move from reflection and conversation towards practice, culminating in an academic research project/presentation sparked by individual student interest and guided by the seminar director.

Senior Honors Seminar Course Descriptions

Below are the tentative descriptions and faculty assignments for the Honors Senior Seminar courses that have been offered between 2019 and 2024. All courses may vary from these initial descriptions in terms of both content and style, depending on the interests of the students. The broad strokes below are intended to act as an umbrella for exploration as students decide which course they should take. The passions and interests of the students, under the guidance of the directors, may affect both the arc of a course and a student's eventual choice of project. Since all projects are designed to potentially meet a wide variety of interests, students should still be able to find an appropriate course within which to pursue a field of interest. Students are expected to engage in dialogue with multiple seminar directors before registering, to explore the ways an area of personal interest might be more fully developed within a given seminar.

American Foreign and Military Policy in the Past Fifty Years

Fr. Augustine

Ever look around at the complicated, unpredictable, and often dangerous world you're living in, and wonder, "how did we get to this point?", or, "are we, as a country, alongside our allies, secure from threats, or from being outpaced, outclassed, or superseded on the world stage?" When one considers the actual armed conflicts, the strategic, economic, and cultural rivalries, tensions, exchanges and competitions... and the geopolitical seismic shifts that have marked the past eighty years, it can, indeed, appear to be a dizzying hurricane of events.

This course aims to make some sense of that hurricane by looking at the ways in which America's military and foreign policy, as well as her hefty economic and cultural power, have had a major impact on the unfolding of world events in the past eight decades, especially with regard to the seismic shifts that were (a) the end of the Cold War, (b) the establishment of a post-Cold War, sole-superpower status quo, (c) the adjustments to that post-Cold War world that were brought on by the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and finally (d) the rise of China as the world's newest superpower, alongside a once-again belligerent Russia.

Students in this course will gain a far more detailed knowledge of America's evolving role on the global stage, her relationships with key friends, allies, competitors, and enemies, as well as a more specific and precise appreciation for the impressive potency—and *limitations*—of the post-Vietnam War American military. To round out the picture, students will also take note of moments in which the self-understanding, goals and/or message of America were memorably expressed ad extra in film or music. Specific readings, as well as excerpted video and audio material, will be chosen based partly on the number and interests of the students who choose to take the course. Students will achieve this greater understanding—grounded in more precise and specific mastery of the facts—of America's geopolitical footprint since 1945, by participating in seminar-style discussions and debates, and by working in the spring semester toward a substantial final research paper and presentation that should afford them a deeper dive into a specific topic of their interest chosen from among the many discussed within the course.

The Cold War

Mr. Saliga

With Russian-American diplomatic relations shakier than they've been in nearly thirty years and with generation z's distance from (and oft-romanticized view of) our country's past as an economic-military-cultural superpower anchoring one end of a socio-politically bipolar world, this course seeks to acquaint its participants with life as it was actually lived during the Cold War (1945-1971). From a measly \$6,000 budget, an ultimate \$2 billion project spawned the first atomic bomb 74 years ago... to the unanticipated horror of the men who brought it into being. In July 1945, Glenn Seaborg, Leo Szilard et al. pleaded that the A-bomb never be tested, that we should put the genie back in the bottle. But it was too late. A Promethean industrial-military complex had captured fire and was determined to enlighten the world with it. Far beyond Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the fallout was terrific. Humanity would quickly come to understand this terror, a dread fear of the total destruction of the planet, as something practically absolute. Though students in this course will study the political, military, and diplomatic highlights of this period, we will also familiarize ourselves with the peaks and valleys of a sometimes bizarre social and cultural landscape. Novels, film, and music all contributed to our ability

to navigate the scientific, political, and moral-philosophical dilemmas that surfaced during an era that has thoroughly shaped our own. So, to better understand the world and our place in it, we will engage in conversation about them all in this course (a specific reading/viewing/listening index will depend on the background of the students who sign up for the course). More than a research class with a fixed end toward which our efforts tend, this will be a thoughtful retreat, a rich dialogue about the tremendous and the trivial that helped humanity survive and thrive during the first phase of post-modern life.

Dystopian Literature and Film Seminar

Dr. Pruitt

The dystopian vision ‘thrives’ in an age when the bedrock institutional norms (which by their nature tend to be traditional and conservative)—in political life, social and economic structures, artistic and cultural norms, and religious understanding—appear to be under severe attack, even to the point of crumbling or being superseded. Such uncertainty about what comes next creates a void in the social order, which opens up toward a wide range of possibilities. Some of these possibilities are cast as bright utopias—the creation of a brave new world of benevolent rule, material abundance, social harmony, and fervent patriotism. Such ideological utopias (because they are rooted in an abstract idea rather than immutable facts of human nature) inevitably fall into the darker world of failed experiments which turn into the despotic rule of a few over the many, a world of immense suffering for the depersonalized masses, and the ruthless, fear-driven denial of any transcendent power.

The Dystopian seminar will focus primarily on literary texts complemented by a selection of interesting films. We will certainly look at the more famous classics of the genre: Orwell’s *1984*, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, and Lewis’ *That Hideous Strength* as well as several short stories including Forster’s “The Machine Stops,” Bradbury’s “The Veldt,” Jackson’s “The Lottery,” and others drawn largely from science fiction. We also will refer to examples from our own curriculum: Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, and Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. We will go back in time to look at Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, More’s *Utopia* and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* as models for what came later. The list of possible films includes *Bladerunner*, *Gattaca*, *The Truman Show*, and many others. We also will supplement our main fare of literature and film with illustrative examples of art, beginning with the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and then looking at more contemporary pieces.

Digital Journalism

Fr. Anthony

Few professions of the modern world have been as affected by the technological age as has the profession of journalism. And it can be argued that modern journalism and digital media have had a similarly huge impact on modern political culture and social connection (or disconnection). In this course, students will build a "toolbox" of digital media skills (such as Adobe Photoshop, InDesign, Digital Photography, and Typography) and then make use of these skills as they create content and build digital platforms/documents/media to share that content. Additionally, students will explore the world of journalism by reading/discussing *Covering America: A Narrative History of a Nation's Journalism* alongside scholarly articles on journalistic ethics and the changing landscape of the sources we use (and trust) for information. The second semester will focus on utilizing the skills students have developed in a project fully designed and completed by the student himself. Perhaps a student works with a non-profit that could use an update to its literature and web-presence? Perhaps a student follows a sports team with a camera, creating a video documentary of their season? Want to create your own self-published book? There are many options for creative efforts in digital media. Students will present their completed project at Senior Seminar Night, explaining the design and thought process, their decisions, as well as share their frustrations and any adjustments they had to make along the way.

Drama: Theatre History to Performance

Mrs. Magill

This course is for anyone inspired or curious about the magic of theatre who wants to experience the joy of the development and production of a play performance while leading a cast from start to finish. During the first semester, students will focus on theatre history, script analysis, the idea of a plot, playwriting, and dramaturgical research (adapting a given story to actable form by taking into account

the main metaphors and characters of the piece but also the intended audience, timing, and locale). Students will study these facets of drama through close readings of scripts, class discussions, and student essays over our readings. During the second semester we will explore and master drama “off the page” – looking from every angle at what it takes to bring a written play to life. This course will culminate in students creating their own production as the director, set designer, dramaturge, producer, publicist, even script-writer and/or performer. Students will select (or write) their play, research it, and determine (and justify) their artistic concept, audition and select a cast, design production elements, organize technical details such as sets and lighting, build a schedule and run rehearsals, and then for their final all-encompassing thesis, stage it for a live audience.

Finessing Whole Language Acquisition – Spanish or French

Mme. Obels-Robinson (French) and Sta. Kennedy (Spanish)

This seminar will be taught in the target language and provide students with numerous opportunities to develop the three modes of communication skills: interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational. While independently working in the target language on the research topic of their choice (i.e. sciences, economy, literature, business, arts...), the students will review vocabulary and grammatical structures using authentic materials, such as magazines, newspapers, and various broadcasts. The faculty will guide the students, reinforcing concepts taught in prior years and polishing the finer nuances of the language. The majority of class time will be spent improving the students’ abilities to hear, understand, and respond orally in the target language. Instructional time will also be devoted to improving writing and reading comprehension skills applied to “real- life” scenarios. By the conclusion of the seminar, the students will be more than adequately prepared to perform the tasks of the AP Spanish or French Language and Culture exam, make extended presentations in the target language, and also exchange with an audience of native speakers.

Introduction to Genetics

Dr. Krumins

Genetics is a broad field that incorporates many different scientific disciplines, including but not limited to classical and advanced genetics, genomics, cell and molecular biology, bioinformatics, disorders, and recombinant DNA technology. In this seminar, students will learn multiple critical skills related to scientific communication by enhancing their scientific comprehension, engagement, and understanding of theoretical and practical approaches to research in genetics. The seminar format will include research via scientific literature and a study of general research methods and analysis in the first semester. Students will actively engage in hands-on laboratory activities, including isolating their own DNA, conducting PCR reactions on their samples, using CRISPR to alter bacterial genomes, and other activities. This approach enables the student to experience the process and products of science.

Students should expect quizzes and a laboratory practical as a final exam in the first semester to demonstrate their understanding. During the second semester, students will begin independent research on a scientific poster that summarizes the current research being done in a scientific field of their choosing. Various deadlines and checkpoints will determine student progress on their poster, and each checkpoint will be saved in an electronic portfolio. Students will update the class on the current progress of their research throughout the semester via presentations. The second project culminates in student understanding by presenting their formal scientific research poster in a seminar-based style during senior seminar night.

Perspectives on the Renaissance

Fr. Gregory

When we think of the Renaissance, too often we begin and end with Michelangelo, Raphael, and da Vinci, but this period from 1300 – 1600 AD is brimming with exciting, new discoveries across the spectrum of human knowledge. For example, just consider that next to Einstein’s $E = mc^2$, the greatest scientific discovery in Western history may well have been the heliocentrism of Copernicus/Galileo. In a single insight, they tossed out 1,000 years of Ptolemaic ‘science’ and replaced it with a galactic vision of the sun as our solar system’s center. In politics, we like to think that American democracy is the fruit of the European Enlightenment; however, none of this would have come about without the fundamental insights of Machiavelli, Thomas More, and Erasmus who *first* traced out the importance of the balance of power which guided the American Revolution. It was in the Renaissance that we see Christendom’s 1,000 years of unity [500-1500 AD] shattered forever in 1517 by a

reforming friar named Martin Luther. And, in writing, could anyone surpass the two greatest artists of Europe, Dante and Shakespeare, and their epic poems, sonnets, dramas, and insightful essays.

Whether we fully recognize it or not, each of us stands in the shadows of these great men and the world they changed. The wars, the political intrigue, the monuments to God and man, the achingly beautiful painting and sculpture, the music that delights the mind, and the intellectual inquisitiveness that sparked both a philosophical and religious revolution – the Renaissance is all this and so much more.

Perhaps there is no better way to encapsulate what the challenge and the glory of the Renaissance mean than to contemplate Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man [<https://www.leonardodavinci.net/the-vitruvian-man.jsp>] - the male figure who stands with one set of arms and legs outstretched and touching the rim of a circle while a second set of limbs touches the edges of a square. On one level, it is a vision of the perfect proportions of mankind; yet, from another perspective, it is the “impossible” mathematical problem of trying to ‘square the circle’. For da Vinci and the Renaissance, the image and the problem were the perfect expression of their striving, seeking, questioning, and understanding. If this many-layered period of history begins to intrigue you, then perhaps this seminar is for you. We’ll read together, look at things together, write a bit together, but most of all: we’ll inquire together.

Political Theory

Mr. Joseph

When you hear people discuss controversial topics such as cancel culture, systemic racism, or lockdowns, it is usually within the context of arguments. Arguments are often made with principles in mind. Whenever a high-profile individual (e.g. a politician, news anchor, late night show host, or radio personality) or a common citizen engages in conversations over difficult questions (whether with the general public or within intimate social circles), then he or she has begun the quest of political philosophy. In seeking to find principle-based solutions to problems, citizens are following in the footsteps of many great thinkers.

The goal in this course is to take the rough beginning of a controversy-based argument and take it to a higher level, to make it more rigorous by looking at the implicit assumptions or logical consequences behind the positions that public intellectuals take on the hot button issues of our day. Along the way, we will explore some of the important writings and documents that have come to frame and support political conversations of the past, present and future. The hope is that examining the issues through this lens will lead to greater clarification of the topics and thus towards more civil discussions, and in a few cases might even lead to a resolution (at the very least in one’s own mind).

Students will accomplish this progression toward deeper thought about societal issues by participating in seminar-style discussions, debates, and by offering their own presentations on thinkers or issues. They will work toward a substantial final project or paper about a topic of their interest chosen from those discussed within the course.

Social Philosophy

Fr. John

The Catholic Church has much to offer our world in its search for justice. In fact, the phrase “social justice” itself (*giustizia sociale*) was coined by a Catholic priest, and the last 150 years have seen several magisterial texts dedicated to topics like business ethics, labor, globalism, war, race, ecology, bioethics, and gender.

Disagreements about such topics are often rooted in deeper disagreements about *what we are* as human beings, and how we *therefore ought to live*. The Church can help our world by sharing its comprehensive and credible account of the human person.

Accordingly, this seminar explores the Catholic philosophical tradition and the principles of its social teaching. Participants will address contemporary controversies by diving deeply into the Catholic tradition. They will wrestle with the relationship between faith and reason, as well as explore the four fundamental principles of Catholic Social Teaching: human dignity, subsidiarity, common good, and solidarity. Concretely, this seminar begins by following Rev. Martin Luther King’s own syllabus for his seminar on social philosophy, and therefore we start with selections from Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas. Then we will introduce Catholic Social Teaching through *Rerum Novarum* (1891), and finally we will also engage modern philosophers such as Marx

and Nietzsche in order to compare the Catholic tradition with an alternative framework for the pursuit of justice – the “critical theory” that is popular today in some circles.

For their final project, participants are expected to research some question in the philosophical tradition and/or social teaching of the Church. While students are encouraged to bring into their research perspectives beyond those discussed in the seminar, it is necessary to draw also upon sources in the Catholic tradition, including at least one encyclical.

Science Research

Mr. West and Dr. Kroll

The seminar offering in Science will revolve around advanced research in scientific methods and medical diagnostics. In the first semester, the format of the seminar will include research via scientific literature and a study of general research methods and analysis. During this time, we will cover numerous topics including, but not limited to: Genomics and Bioinformatics, High-Throughput Analysis, Virology, Immunology, Proteomics, Genetics, Cell Biology, Transgenic Technology, and a study of Model Organisms. Students will be expected to read and present scientific literature summarizing the applications of various scientific methods as well as characterization of disease states. Students should expect quizzes and exams in the first semester to demonstrate their understanding. During the second semester, students will begin independent research on a review paper that summarizes the current research being done in a scientific field of their choosing. The paper will have various deadlines and/or checkpoints throughout the semester where students will receive feedback on the current progress of their paper. Students will rotate updating the class on the current progress of their research throughout the semester via presentation. A final copy of the paper will be submitted at the end of the semester in addition to the Senior Seminar night presentation component of the course.

Tolkien and Lewis: Literature, Society, and Faith

Dr. Pruitt

The expectations that World War I was to be “the war to end all wars” became instead a nightmare that ushered in the wholesale bloodbaths that would dominate the twentieth century. The civilization of Western Europe never really recovered, and the war left in its wake an anger and disillusionment whose artistic expression radically changed the direction of cultural life throughout England and the Continent. Among those whose lives were deeply affected by the horrors of the war were C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, two remarkable writers whose personal experience of the horrors of that war did not lead them to bitterness and despair but rather to a deeper experience of their Christian Faith. Their response was rather to write stories which proclaimed a world in which there was real tragedy and deep suffering, but in which the tragedy did not have the final word. In the creation both of the mythology and tales of Middle Earth, and of the worlds of Narnia and space fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis saw in the tragedy and growing chaos of the twentieth century something deeper, a “eucatastrophe” (to use Tolkien’s term) meant to bring readers (and later viewers) into a fuller participation in the mystery of Christian suffering. The works of both men, who were lifelong friends, became among the most widely published and influential works of fiction in the twentieth century. Both saw themselves as Christian realists who found in the Christian faith the surest answer to the growing materialism and nihilism which developed rapidly in the post-war years. This seminar will attempt to examine Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (and the mythological framework provided by *The Silmarillion* and at least some of Tolkien’s other posthumously published writings) as well as Lewis’ *Narnia Chronicles* and *Space Trilogy* (and with some reference to the most significant of Lewis’s apologetic writings). The chief questions we want to pursue in this course are first, how did each author come to see the creation of such stories as his life’s work, and second, how did their storytelling give expression to the faith which sustained them and through which they saw the world?

Utopian Literature: The Good Place that is No Place

Fr. Stephen

Allan Bloom wrote: “Utopianism is, as Plato taught us at the outset, the fire with which we must play because it is the only way we can find out what we are. We need to criticize false understandings of Utopia, but the easy way out provided by realism is deadly.” This seminar proposes a study of literature under the lens of the utopian and dystopian, to gain a deeper sense of how literature works, how the imaged and ideal places relate to reality, how philosophy can be performed in literature, and, indeed, to “find out what we are” and what we should do. A primary level of the course is the consideration of certain foundational works along the centuries, including these: Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), Francis Bacon’s *The New Atlantis* (1627), Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* (1872), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1972), and something from this millennium. In addition to various other literary works in other genres (science fiction, children’s stories, comix), we will consider mythological, theological, philosophical, folkloric, and political works that face the questions of what makes a perfect and imperfect world, trying to explain, for example, the paradise of Eden, the state of nature, the best of all possible worlds, the golden age, the beginning of the great city. Participants in the seminar will be called upon to write frequent short reflections on their reading in order to perfect their writing skills and prepare for class discussion. The final goal of the course would be that each student develops (in writing) a sense of what topics must be addressed by any human consideration of a perfect world and what preoccupations inspire our worries about this world, that he composes his own vision of how those considerations should be responded to in our actual lives (and questions the possibility of his ideas, and how what is perfect might go wrong). The student will either write a work of fiction based on his thoughts, or write a research paper on how other works of literature, film, etc., participate and innovate in the Utopian genre.

Technology

Mr. Graham and Fr. Christopher

Technology dominates our world today, and the capabilities technology gives us are advancing at an accelerating rate. Often, we develop these capabilities faster than we can understand their environmental, social, moral, or existential impact. Whether it be gene editing, industrial farming, nuclear weapons, fossil fuels, the smart phone, artificial intelligence, or Twitter, these technologies can have a tremendous impact on human life, either for good or for bad. Those who are entering technology related fields today have the opportunity not only to develop new technologies and products, but also to guide how they are used.

In the beginning of the fall semester, we will examine the writing of Francis Bacon, who in the 17th century envisioned a new kind of knowledge that would allow humanity to become masters over nature for the purpose of improving our quality of life. We will talk about how this approach to knowledge grew to dominate our world, resulting in our modern approach to science and technology that has given us the lifestyle we enjoy today, but also threatens to destroy us. We will then study a Christian response to this mindset, discussing what we can do to avoid the bad effects of our technological powers.

The rest of the semester will focus on a technology that dominates the world today: the Internet. We will study how the Internet works and at the same time learn how to write programs for the Internet. We will study the Go programming language, which was created by Google for implementing their Internet services, and use Go to create programs that communicate over a network. For those of you who remember Python, learning Go will provide a good complement to your Python knowledge. For those who don’t remember Python or who have not done any coding, we will start with basic concepts as we learn Go, so you should be able to catch up.

In the spring semester, students will choose a software project to build. Creating a network or web application in Go is preferred, but other project ideas will be considered. The students will give a presentation about their projects on Senior Seminar Night in April, and each student will write a reflection paper documenting their project experience.