“LIES: FROM PLATO TO POLITICS”

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Mon. & Wed. (9:20 - 10:20) and by appointment

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Experimental College - 0002

Office Hours:  
Mon. 6:30 - 9:00 p.m.  
Braker 225

COURSE DESCRIPTION
Who’s a bigger liar, Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton? If you can answer that question and still vote for either of them, you may be ready to accept that lies and accusations of lies play a prominent and accepted role in national political culture. Truth has long been associated with political stability, since Plato argued that poets should be expelled from an ideal state because their representations are false copies of ideal forms. Their literature “feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue.” Yet passionate language dominates contemporary politics, and literature seems to find virtue in its passionate falsehood, its ability to explode the cold constraints of verification and objectivity. How are passions, lies, and creative language (poiesis) connected? What kind of state would condemn them? Do lies facilitate political engagement for subordinated groups (e.g. minorities of race, gender, and sexual orientation)? How is literary language differentiated from other forms of public speech such as political campaigning, “bullshit,” and play-acting? This course will explore these questions through the colorful history of explanations, condemnations, glorifications, obfuscations, and qualifications of lying. We will examine texts in literature, philosophy, and other fields, mapping out the ethical and conceptual gray areas of lying. Understanding what lies are, how they work, and who they harm will allow us to perform nuanced critiques of language use in public life.

EXPECTED LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR THE COURSE
Most broadly, students will learn to conduct inter-disciplinary inquiry into a theoretical issue in language. More specifically, students will be able to produce thoughtful, well-reasoned, and well-informed arguments about the ethical and political repercussions of language use. Their understanding of lying will allow them to locate deceptive speech in cultural discourse, and this contextualization will prepare them to better judge the effects of lies and public condemnations of lies.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES
Attendance and Discussion - Everyone must come to class and participate in discussion. If you are going to be absent, please email me in advance of class. No excuses are necessary. More than one absence will lower your final grade by ⅓.

Reading - Students must complete the readings assigned each week and bring those readings to class. Books are available from the Tufts Bookstore, though you may purchase them anywhere you can find the same edition. Other course texts are available on our course website: https://sites.tufts.edu/lies/

Weekly Journal Entries - The weekly journal will record personal and argumentative responses to course readings as well as encounters with lies in daily life or the news that students find interesting. You
may begin with a description of whether you liked or disliked a piece, or with a personal experience, but always think philosophically, analytically, and logically about your experience to understand why you like or dislike something, or why an experience feels noteworthy. This is the best way to start thinking about course readings and to prepare some things to say during class. Please avoid summarizing the readings—I will have read them too. At least one student will read a journal entry on an event or text outside class to spark discussion during each class session, and I will check that journal entries have been done each week for a participation grade.

**Paper 1** - Due Friday, 2/12, at 5 p.m. by email. Analyze two course texts or one course text and one text from outside class (a definition from a reference source, a news article, a poll, a research article, etc.). How are they similar or different in their treatment of language, law, politics, society, and morality? How do similarities and differences reveal the social and political force of lying and condemning lying? Focus on a specific and concrete aspect of the texts, avoiding summary, to show how deeply you can analyze the texts’ arguments, styles, metaphors, and other rhetorical effects. 3 pages.

**Paper 2** - Due Friday, 3/18, at 5 p.m. by email. Use one or two course readings as the basis for an extended analysis that will incorporate 3-5 texts from outside class. Students may write an argument about the historical and cultural meaning of the course text, or they may write an argument that uses literary or philosophical criticism, empirical data, or other theories to produce a nuanced and informative reading of the course text. 5 pages.

**N.B.** You may request an extension for a paper deadline if you email me a request, with a prospective due date, 24 hours before the deadline. Without an extension, late paper grades will be dropped by ⅓ for each day a paper is late.**

**Final Presentation** - Create a thought experiment or present a case study, analyzing it through the lens of one or more of the thinkers or theories discussed in the course. The history of discourse on lying is full of interesting dangers: murderers at the door, robbers on the high road, and compulsive bullshitters in the workplace. Students should exercise their own abilities to create hypothetical situations or apply theories to novel cases from daily life, literature, or the news. This presentation will demonstrate that students have the ability to apply what we have discussed in class to new situations.

**GETTING HELP:**

**Tutoring:** Free writing tutoring is available through the Academic Resource Center ([http://uss.tufts.edu/arc/writingtutoring/](http://uss.tufts.edu/arc/writingtutoring/)). Tutoring is an excellent opportunity to get personalized attention for your writing. I am a writing tutor, but you may not get tutoring help from me. Tutors are great for brainstorming, organizing, getting over obstacles to writing, and revising your work.

**Student Accessibility Services:** Tufts University is committed to providing equal access and support to all students by providing reasonable accommodations so that each student may access their curricula and achieve their personal and academic potential. If you have a disability that requires reasonable accommodations please contact the Student Accessibility Services office at 617-627-4539, or through their email at [Accessibility@tufts.edu](mailto:Accessibility@tufts.edu) to make an appointment with the director to determine appropriate
accommodations. Please be aware that accommodations cannot be enacted retroactively, making timeliness a critical aspect for their provision.

**Office Hours:** I am available at office hours and by appointment to talk with you about your work and any other academic issues you may need help with. Mandatory office hours conferences will be scheduled for the beginning of the semester and possibly once at mid-term.

**Peers:** Please use each other as editors for reading drafts and getting comments. As difficult as it may be to show your work to someone else before it is finished, your peers’ fresh eyes will do more good than hours of revising alone. That said, your paper must always be your own work! I need to hear your ideas in your own voice.

**Plagiarism is Unacceptable:** While you may solicit help from your peers, the consequences of plagiarism are serious and harsh. Your work must consist of your own words and your own thoughts, and it may not be work submitted for another class. Don’t be tempted to plagiarize when you’re running out of time. Ask for an extension or take the lateness penalty, which is much less harsh than getting caught plagiarizing. We will discuss avoiding plagiarism in the research process, but in the meantime please refer to the Tufts Academic Integrity Handbook and ask me if you have questions.

**GRADING:**

- Participation (Attendance, Discussion, Reading) 10%
- Weekly Journals 20%
- Papers 50%
- Final Presentation 20%

**TENTATIVE SCHEDULE**

**1/25 - Week 1 - Lying, Truth and Politics: Defining Terms and Stakes.** In this class we will introduce the terms of our discussion and look at some examples of lying that bear further analysis. We will consider what language, lies, and truth have to do with politics.

- **Activities**
  - Student and Instructor Introductions, Course Introduction.

**2/1 - Week 2 - Lying in the Philosophical Imagination: Selections from Antiquity.**

This class will lay out some of the oldest discussions of lying, which will ground our conversations as we work to define lying and its uses.

- **Activities**
  - Discussion of readings.

- **Readings**
  - Plato - Selections from *The Republic* (ca. 380 BCE)
  - Lucian of Samosata - Selections from *True History* (ca. 120-190 CE)
  - St. Augustine - Selections from “Lying” (395 CE)

**2/8 - Week 3 - The Renaissance: Lies, Laughter, and Power.** Jonson’s play offers an early and entertaining example of lies, social cohesion, retribution, and the comic, dramatic pleasures of detecting
and punishing liars. Discussion will address the acceptability of lies in politics, literature, and life. We will also consider how the play figures and produces passion, pleasure, and happiness.

Assignments
Paper 1 Due at the end of the week (Friday, 2/12)

Readings
Ben Jonson - *Volpone* (1605)
Niccolò Machiavelli - Ch. 18 of *The Prince* (1532)
Francis Bacon - “Of Truth” (1625)
Sir Philip Sydney - Selections from “Defence of Poesy” (1595)

Activities
One or more readings from student journals
Small groups lead discussions of each of the 5 acts of the play (find one instance of lying and compare it to definitions from either Plato, Augustine, Lucian, or Sydney)

2/18 - Week 4 - Enlightened Lies: Lying and the Social Contract (I). This class will begin an ongoing discussion of the problematics of lying in modern thought, especially Enlightenment views of truth and the social contract. The Braddon novel exemplifies this Enlightenment order while suggesting the possibility that lies may be justifiable, and liars may deserve sympathy. Students will explore this division between order and transgression in the first phase of a mock trial.

Reading
Immanuel Kant - Selections from *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and “On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives” (1799)
J.S. Mill - Selections from “Utilitarianism” (1861/1863)
Mary Elizabeth Braddon - *Lady Audley’s Secret* (I) (1862)

Activities
One or more readings from student journals
Discussion of readings
Preparations for mock trial next week

2/22 - Week 5 - Enlightened Lies: Lying and the Social Contract (II). We will continue our discussion of social contract, justice, and exemptions from punishment. Students will present their arguments in a mock trial: we will discuss evidence, give judgment and sentence Lady Audley.

Reading
Braddon - *Lady Audley’s Secret* (II)

Activities
One or more readings from student journals
Discussion of readings
Mock trial activity.

2/29 - Week 6 - Judicious Lying - Doing Good with Lies (I). This class will further explore exceptions to the idea that truth is required for the social contract. We will discuss the possibility that lies may be not just pleasurable and entertaining, but also may agitate flawed public morals and common opinions.
Reading
Mark Twain - “On the Decay of the Art Lying” (1880)
Mark Twain - *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (I) (1884)

Activities
One or more readings from student journals
Discussion of readings

3/7 - Week 7 - Judicious Lying - Doing Good with Lies (II). We will bring *Huckleberry Finn* to bear on discussions of justice in our own time, considering the value of truth and lies for social cohesion in diverse, liberal societies.

Assignments
Draft of Bibliography for Paper 2 Due (3-5 references)

Reading
Mark Twain - *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (II)
Dietrich Bonhoeffer - “What is Meant by ‘Telling the Truth’?” (1949)

Activities
One or more readings from student journals
Defining public morals: small groups will choose an activist cause from contemporary culture and lead discussion. What are the moral principles and common practices that form conflicts regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, class, etc?
Discussion of readings

3/14 - Week 8 - Lying and Indeterminacy. In this class we will reconsider the truth of utterances in terms of speech acts, focusing on the complexity and opacity of deceptive speech.

Assignments:
Paper 2 due at the end of the week.

Readings
Nella Larsen - *Passing* (1929)
J.L. Austin - Selections from *How to Do Things with Words* (1962)

Activities
One or more readings from student journals
Discussion of readings.
Speech act and lie analysis: in pairs, students will write down a lie, then write its constative and performative properties; discuss whether or how the constative can be separated from the performative.

3/21 - No Class, Spring Break.

3/28 - Week 9 - Lying and Aestheticism, Surfaces and Essences (I). In this class we will begin to look at an aesthetic approach to lying. Why would some artists and thinkers advocate lying? How different are aesthetic deceptions from aesthetic truth?

Readings
Oscar Wilde - “The Decay of Lying” (1891)
Friedrich Nietzsche - "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" (1873)

Activities
One or more readings from student journals
Discussion of readings
Aesthetic truth: small groups discuss brief excerpts from Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory that complicate the division between truth and lies in aesthetics.

4/4 - Week 10 - Lying and Aestheticism, Surfaces and Essences (II). This class will continue the discussion of lying and truth in art by looking at the ways Wilde’s play synthesizes lying and truth. We will also ask whether and how twentieth century politics is any different from premodern politics.

Readings
Oscar Wilde - The Importance of Being Earnest (1895)
Hannah Arendt - “Truth and Politics” (1968) (focus on sections IV and V)

Activities
One or more readings from student journals
Discussion of readings

4/11 - Week 11 - Lying in Postmodernity (I). In this class, we will consider some etiolations of lying and the postmodern question of whether truth is necessary at all. Could we ever know the truth? Why is it necessary to find the truth? Does false speech still make claims on us that are worth acknowledging?

Readings
Vladimir Nabokov - Pale Fire (I) (1962)

Activities
One or more readings from student journals
Discussion of readings
Excerpts from Errol Morris - The Unknown Known

4/18 - No Class, Patriot’s Day

4/25 - Week 12 - Lying in Postmodernity (II). In this class we will continue our discussion of postmodernist distrust of truth. Can politics work in the absence of solid grounds in truth? We’ve come a long way from Plato, now. And if Baudrillard’s and Nabokov’s texts shake the grounds of truth, do they also shake the grounds of lying?

Readings
Vladimir Nabokov - Pale Fire (II)

Activities
One or more readings from student journals
Discussion of readings
Final presentation preparation in small groups: students will talk through draft outlines of their presentations.
5/2 - Week 13 - Final Presentations, Conclusions. Students present their work and answer audience questions. Conclusions.

Assignments

Weekly Journals Collected for Final Grade

Activities

Final Presentations in Class.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Short selections of these texts will be available on the Course Website:


Books to Buy or Borrow:


Wilde, Oscar. The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays by Oscar Wilde. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 9780199535972