ISS 1691: Immortality

Quest 1: Nature and Culture

I. General Information

Class Meetings

- Spring 2026
- 100% In-Person, No GTAs, 35 Residential
- Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 4:05 – 4:55 pm
- CSE 0453
- 3 Credits

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Instructor

- Mattias Gassman
- Office hours: Monday, 1:45 – 3:45 pm or by appointment
- Tel: (352) 294-2134
- CSE 0444
- mattias.gassman@ufl.edu

Course Description

What is immortality? Can we live forever? What would it mean to live forever, and should we want to? What part of us would live on—and who, after all, are we? For millennia, humans have debated, hoped for, questioned, and flatly rejected the possibility of everlasting life in the body or after death. In this multidisciplinary course, we will explore the long history of Western thinking about immortality in its many senses: figurative survival through memory of great deeds, personal salvation after death, elevation to status as a literal god, restoration to bodily life, and collective survival as a species.

We will see how hope, skepticism, and changing expectations of immortality shaped the epic poetry, philosophy, religious literature, novels, and art of the Greeks and Romans. We will watch the spread of the Jewish expectation for bodily resurrection and a literal end of the world transform Greco-Roman conceptions of immortality. In both literary traditions, intellectual and personal encounters with immortal beings—gods, angels, and immortalized humans—are a constant theme, one reworked decisively by Christian philosophy and poetry. We now experience the world through modern science and the technologies it has made possible. Does that transformation require yet a new way of thinking about immortality—or complete rejection of the possibility? In the final weeks of the course, we will turn to modern archeology, philosophy, and speculative literature, to ponder the enduring significance of immortality and the questions it raises.

Quest and General Education Credit

- Quest 1
- Humanities
- Writing Requirement (WR) 2000 words

This course accomplishes the Quest and General Education objectives of the subject areas listed above. A minimum grade of C is required for Quest and General Education credit. Courses intended to satisfy Quest and General Education requirements cannot be taken S-U.
The Writing Requirement (WR) ensures students both maintain their fluency in writing and use writing as a tool to facilitate learning.

Course grades have two components. To receive writing requirement credit, a student must receive a grade of C or higher and a satisfactory completion of the writing component of the course.

Required Readings and Works

- Lombardo, Stanley, trans. *The Essential Homer* (Hackett, 2000)
- Lewis, C.S. *Perelandra* (Scribner, 2003 [first published 1943]) [This text is available, used, in various other editions, whose page numbers can vary widely. Purchasing the Scribner edition will help make sure that you are—literally—on the same page with the rest of the class.]
- Dobranski, Stephen B., ed. *John Milton, Paradise Lost*, Norton Library (W.W. Norton, 2022) [Other texts of *Paradise Lost* are widely available, including for free online. While using the Norton Library edition is not strictly required, I will base assessments on it. I very strongly recommend using *some* printed edition, since the updated spelling and notes will help you navigate Milton's seventeenth-century English.]
- Recommended: Stanley Lombardo, trans. *Virgil: Aeneid*, introduction by W.R. Johnson (Hackett, 2005). [The e-book is available through the library catalogue and will be placed on course reserve. Obtaining a print copy is therefore not required, though I still recommend it.]
- Additional *required* readings will be made available as PDFs, library e-books, or through links on Canvas and/or the library e-reserve system.
- Materials and Supplies Fees: N/A

Course materials provided or linked online may be protected by copyright. Do not distribute or use them for purposes outside of this class.

Course Objectives

1. Identify, describe, and explain the history of the philosophical, religious, and political pursuit of immortality in Western civilization from Homer to the 20th century.
2. Identify, describe, and explain theories for conceptualizing human immortality, immortal beings, and life after death as developed across the long arc of Greco-Roman culture and further elaborated in the modern world.

3. Identify, describe, and explain modern scholarly and scientific engagement with themes of immortality, and the scholarly methodologies involved.
4. Analyze how works across disciplines and genres from the ancient, early modern, and modern worlds represent immortal beings and the possibility of immortality.
5. Analyze and assess the intellectual viability of competing philosophical and religious accounts of immortality.
6. Identify and analyze philosophical, scientific, and religious concepts of immortality as developed in fictional works of various genres.
7. Develop and articulate in writing clear and effective responses to central questions about the theme of immortality and its development over time.
8. Communicate clear, effective, and well-supported ideas and arguments, orally and in writing, about the philosophical and cultural significance of immortality.
9. Connect literary and intellectual themes of immortality with students' intellectual, personal, and professional lives at UF and beyond.
10. Reflect on the relevance and viability of concepts of immortality in modern life.

Assignments

- 12 quizzes
- 1 experiential learning component
- 1 analytical paper (2000 words, due in week 14)

Instructions on computer use

Most of you will learn better if you read printed texts and take notes by hand, rather than working on an electronic device. If you are able, I **strongly** encourage you to print out the online readings and take notes on paper, especially during our class meetings. If you use a computer to access course texts, please do **not** use it to take notes in class, unless you have discussed doing so with me. If you appear to be using electronic devices for non-class-related purposes, your participation grade will be reduced.

AI policy

Use of LLMs and other AI technologies to produce content for your assignments is forbidden.

II. Graded Work

Description of Graded Work

1. **Active Participation and Attendance: 20%**
    a. 10% of your grade is based on discussion participation: an exemplary participant shows evidence of having done the assigned reading before each class, consistently offers thoughtful points and questions for discussion, and listens considerately to other discussants. See participation rubric below.
    b. 10% of your grade is based on attendance. On-time class attendance is required for this component of the course grade. You may have two unexcused absences without any penalty. Starting with the third unexcused absence, each unexcused

absence reduces your attendance grade by 1 percentage point: an A (10) becomes an A- (9), then a B- (8), and so on.

c. Except for absence because of religious holiday observance, documentation is required for excused absences, per UF attendance policy. **Excessive unexcused absences (10 or more) will result in failure of the course**. If you miss 10 or more classes (excused or not), you will miss material essential for successful completion of the course.

2. **Quizzes (twelve, drop the lowest two): 50%**
   a. On the last class session in each of weeks 2–13, we will have an in-class quiz. You will be asked to answer questions, identify terms or passages, write an informal mini-essay, and/or comment on passages from the readings.
   b. Your lowest two quiz scores will be dropped, and the remaining scores will be used to calculate the quiz grade.
   c. All quizzes are closed-book and answered on paper. Further information will be given in class.
3. **Experiential learning component (500 words), due Week 7: 5%**
   a. You will visit a museum or site of similar interest, identify an object/display, and write up a report. See description below. Professor will provide written feedback. The length of your report will be a minimum of 500 words.
   b. Due Friday, February 27 (week 7) at **11:59 pm** EST.
4. **Analytical paper (2,000 words), due Week 14 (5% outline, 20% final version): 25%**
   a. You will submit a minimum 2,000-word essay on a thesis that responds to a prompt concerning the pursuit of immortality in Western culture.
   b. Your argument must engage closely with at least four course readings and should show an accurate and nuanced knowledge of the overarching history of ideas on immortality. Professor will provide written feedback on content, organization and coherence, effectiveness, style, grammar, and punctuation. See Canvas for details.
   c. **A provisional outline of your paper is due 2.5 weeks in advance, on Friday, April 3 (week 11) at 11:59 pm EST**. This outline will be worth a flat 5% of the grade. To receive full credit, it must state a relevant thesis, incorporate at least three sources, and total at least **500 words**. Less complete texts may receive partial credit.
   d. Final version due Monday, April 20 (week 14) at **11:59 pm** EST.

III. Annotated Weekly Schedule

Unit 1. Immortal glory: before the afterlife

What is worth living for, in a world of gods who cannot die and mortals who know they will soon die? We begin our study with selections from the *Iliad* of Homer, the first and central book in the Greek cultural tradition.

Monday, January 12 (week 1) – Introduction to the class and to Homer's *Iliad*

Wednesday, January 14 (week 1) – Homer, *Iliad* 1-3 (42 pp.) [Note: these readings look long, but the text has ample white space and flows very quickly.]
Friday, January 16 (week 1) – Homer, *Iliad* 4-6 (40 pp.)

Wednesday, January 21 (week 2) – Homer, *Iliad* 8-12 (48 pp.)
Friday, January 23 (week 2) – Homer, *Iliad* 13-16 (46 pp.)

Monday, January 26 (week 3) – Homer, *Iliad* 18-21 (29 pp.)
Wednesday, January 28 (week 3) – Homer, *Iliad* 22-24 (36 pp.)

Unit 2. Greco-Roman afterlives

The Greeks of Homer's day could imagine humans lingering on, not alive and yet not entirely gone, after death. Over the following centuries, we watch the development of Greco-Roman ideas about the afterlife and the underworld, from early Greek poetry, through Plato, to the time of Julius Caesar.

Friday, January 30 (week 3) – Homer, *Odyssey* 11, Lombardo, pp. 332-51 (20 pp.)
Monday, February 2 (week 4) – *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (13 pp.)
Wednesday, February 4 (week 4) – Plato, *Republic* 10, "Myth of Er" (13 pp.)
Friday, February 6 (week 4) – Cicero, *On the Commonwealth* 6.9-29 ("Dream of Scipio") (8 pp.)

Unit 3. Building the Eternal City

What claim does a city or a nation have on human beings? Can the desire for immortality be satisfied by duty to family and country? Building on Homer, Plato, and Cicero, we read approximately half of the great epic of imperial Rome: Vergil's *Aeneid.*

Monday, February 9 (week 5) – Vergil, *Aeneid* 1 (26 pp.) [Note: these readings look long, but the text has ample white space and flows very quickly.]
Wednesday, February 11 (week 5) – Vergil, *Aeneid* 2 (27 pp.)
Friday, February 13 (week 5) – Vergil, *Aeneid* 3; 4.1-476 (37 pp.)

Monday, February 16 (week 6) – Vergil, *Aeneid* 6 (32 pp.)
Wednesday, February 18 (week 6) – Vergil, *Aeneid 7* (28 pp.)
Friday, February 20 (week 6) –Vergil, *Aeneid* 8.1-202, 426-844; 12.783-1157 (29 pp.)

Unit 4. The resurrection of the body

Greco-Roman conceptions of the afterlife generally centered on the immortality of the soul. In a corner of the Near East, a very different hope was taking shape. We begin the second part of our course by exploring the beginnings of the distinctive Christian understanding of immortality and the resurrection of the dead. How did the legacy of Jewish thought and the experience of Jesus lead to a new understanding of the afterlife that would dominate Western culture for almost two thousand years?

Monday, February 23 (week 7) – Introducing the Judeo-Christian tradition: excerpts from the Hebrew Bible (15 pp.)
Wednesday, February 25 (week 7) – Resurrection and judgment: more excerpts from the Old Testament (15 pp.)
Friday, February 27 (week 7) – The resurrection and the new age: excerpts from the New Testament (15 pp.) **Experiential learning component (museum report) due**

Unit 5. Saints and Saviors

Do people have to be great—powerful, educated, influential—to gain immortality? Christianity posed a fundamental challenge to Greco-Roman values. Nowhere was that challenge more clearly expressed than in the glorification of a new kind of immortal being: the martyred saint. We begin with a pagan (and grotesquely farcical) story of personal transformation and salvation: the metamorphosis and adventures of Lucius, titular donkey of Apuleius's *Golden Ass*. We then turn to the harrowing account of the imprisonment and execution of two young Roman women and their male companions—based, seemingly, on Perpetua's own prison diary—in 203. We conclude with the triumphant vision of Rome's conversion put in the mouth of a martyr by the late fourth-century poet Prudentius.

Monday, March 2 (week 8) – Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11, *On the God of Socrates* (excerpts) (23 pp.)
Wednesday, March 4 (week 8) – *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity* (trans. Jacobs; 10 pp.)
Friday, March 6 (week 8) – Prudentius, *The Martyrs' Crowns* 2 (Hymn to Lawrence) (18 pp.)

Unit 6. Paradise and the loss of immortality

Christian scripture does not simply promise a future resurrection, judgment, and remaking of the world. It also posits an original loss of immortality given to humans by God. We have seen the myths made by the Greeks and Romans, both before and after Plato's case for the immortality of the soul. How is the epic tradition transformed by Christian belief in the loss of immortality by both humans and angelic powers? We turn now to the Garden of Eden of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and to his imagination of the fallen angelic powers mentioned, but almost never described, in Greek and Hebrew scripture.

Monday, March 9 (week 9) – John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 1.1-270 (8 pp.); review Genesis 1-3 (2 pp.)
Wednesday, March 11 (week 9) – John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 1.271-669 (11 pp.)
Friday, March 13 (week 9) – John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 4.172-775 (16 pp.)

Monday, March 23 (week 10) – John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 6.56-679 (16 pp.)
Wednesday, March 25 (week 10) – John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 9.643-1189 (15 pp.)
Friday, March 27 (week 10) – John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 10.845-1104, 12.469-649 (12 pp.)

Unit 7. Beyond immortality? Technology and human destiny

Can we still conceive of an individual immortality in an industrial world? Do we need to, or is the chance to master evolution and environment enough? What role do technology, knowledge

of the human past, and philosophical outlooks play in shaping our perceptions of human potential? We compare the speculative literary depictions of immortality and human destiny set out by two British public intellectuals of the early twentieth century: J.B.S. Haldane, biologist, Communist, and early transhumanist, and the Medievalist and Christian writer C.S. Lewis.

Monday, March 31 (week 11) – J.B.S Haldane, *Daedalus; or, Science and the Future* (94 pages with large type and wide margins ≈ 25 to 30 normal pages)
Wednesday, April 1 (week 11) – J.B.S. Haldane, "The Last Judgment," in *Possible Worlds and Other Essays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927; Phoenix Library 1930), 287-312 (26 pp.)
Friday, April 3 (week 11) – In-class discussion: technology and immortality
Analytical paper outlines due.

Monday, April 6 (week 12) – C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra: A Novel* (Scribner, 1996 [1944]), chs. 1-2 (18 pp.)
Wednesday, April 8 (week 12) – Lewis, *Perelandra*, chs. 3-5 (33 pp.)
Friday, April 10 (week 12) – Lewis, *Perelandra*, chs. 6-7 (23 pp.)

Monday, April 13 (week 13) – Lewis, *Perelandra*, chs. 8-9 (22 pp.)
Wednesday, April 15 (week 13) – Lewis, *Perelandra*, chs. 10-11 (21 pp.)
Friday, April 17 (week 13) – Lewis, *Perelandra*, chs. 12-13 (19 pp.)

Monday, April 20 (week 14) – Lewis, *Perelandra*, chs. 14-15 (20 pp.)
Analytical papers due.
Wednesday, April 22 (week 14) – Lewis, *Perelandra*, chs. 16-17 (24 pp.)

IV. Grading Scale and Rubrics

Grading Scale

For information on UF's grading policies for assigning grade points, see here.

A	94 – 100%		C	74 – 76%
A–	90 – 93%		C–	70 – 73%
B+	87 – 89%		D+	67 – 69%
B	84 – 86%		D	64 – 66%
B–	80 – 83%		D–	60 – 63%
C+	77 – 79%		E	<60

Grading Rubric(s)

Participation Rubric

Excellent (90%-100%)	Typically comes to class with questions about the readings in mind. Engages others about ideas, respects the opinions of others and consistently elevates the level of discussion
Good (80%-89%)	Does not always come to class with questions about the reading in mind. Waits passively for others to raise interesting issues. Some in this category, while courteous and articulate, do not adequately listen to other participants or relate their comments to the direction of the conversation.
Average (70%-79%)	Attends regularly but typically is an infrequent or unwilling participant in discussion.
Insufficient (60%-69%) or **Unsatisfactory (below 60%)**	Fails to attend class regularly and is inadequately prepared for discussion.

Experiential learning rubric

Full credit (95%-100%)	Report meets length requirement; identifies an object/display as assigned; includes two photos, one of the object/display itself and the other showing the student with the object/display; and includes both a description and a reflection that cites at least three specific, relevant passages from our readings or images from the class presentations. Grade may be reduced by 5% for significant stylistic flaws, repeated typos, etc.
Partial credit (85%)	A report may fall into this category for two reasons: 1. Report contains all necessary elements, but is a) too short or b) includes only one or two relevant citations; or 2. It includes reflection and the required selfie but omits a photo and/or description of the object/display itself. Grade may be reduced by 5% for significant stylistic flaws, repeated typos, etc.
Minimal credit (0-60%)	A report may fall into this category for two reasons: 1. It does not include a photograph of the student with the object/display. 2. While generally well-written on the level of style, typography, and punctuation, it is vague, superficial, or illogical, as evidenced by features such as the following: a. It derives multiple citations, without explanation, from passages or texts we have not read. b. Key citations are nonsensical (the passage cited has nothing to do with the idea being discussed). c. It does not include citations at all. Reports displaying the above features may receive up to 60% credit. Failure to submit a report will result in 0% credit.

Analytical Paper Rubric

	Excellent (90%-100%)	Good (80%-89%)	Average (70%-79%)	Insufficient (60%-69%) or Unsatisfactory (below 60%)
Thesis and Argumentation	Thesis is clear, specific, and presents a thoughtful, critical, engaging, and creative interpretation of the text(s). Argument logically and thoroughly supports the thesis.	Thesis is clear and specific, but not as critical or original. Shows insight and attention to the text(s) under consideration. May have gaps in argument's logic.	Thesis is present but not clear or specific, demonstrating a lack of critical engagement with the text(s). Argument is weak, missing important details or making logical leaps with insufficient support.	Thesis is vague and/or confused, demonstrates a failure to understand the text(s). Argument lacks logical flow and makes little or no use of source material.
Use of Sources	At least four relevant texts are well incorporated, deployed, and contextualized throughout.	At least four relevant texts are incorporated, but with less context and/or less effective incorporation into the argument.	Relevant texts are present but are not properly contextualized, are present in insufficient number, and/or are insufficiently incorporated into the argument.	Two or fewer relevant texts appear.
Organization	Clear organization. Introduction provides adequate background information and incorporates a thesis. Details are in logical order. Conclusion is strong and states the point of the paper.	Clear organization. Introduction clearly states thesis, but does not provide as much background information. Details are in logical order, but may be more difficult to follow. Conclusion is recognizable and ties up almost all loose ends.	Significant lapses in organization. Introduction states thesis but does not adequately provide background information. Some details not in logical or expected order, resulting in a distracting read. Conclusion is recognizable but does not tie up all loose ends.	Poor organization. Hard to follow. There is no clear introduction of the main topic or thesis. There is no clear conclusion, and the paper just ends. Little or no employment of logical body paragraphs.

Grammar and mechanics	Minimal errors.	A few errors.	Some errors.	Many errors.

V. Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

At the end of this course, students will be expected to have achieved the Quest the General Education student learning outcomes for Humanities (H).

Humanities (H) Humanities courses must afford students the ability to think critically through the mastering of subjects concerned with human culture, especially literature, history, art, music, and philosophy, and must include selections from the Western canon.

Humanities courses provide instruction in the history, key themes, principles, terminology, and theory or methodologies used within a humanities discipline or the humanities in general. Students will learn to identify and to analyze the key elements, biases and influences that shape thought. These courses emphasize clear and effective analysis and approach issues and problems from multiple perspectives.

Content: *Students demonstrate competence in the terminology, concepts, theories and methodologies used within the discipline(s).*

- Identify, describe, and explain the history of the philosophical, religious, and political pursuit of immortality in Western civilization from Homer to the 20th century. (Quest 1, H) Assessments: Active class participation, reading quizzes, analytical paper.
- Identify, describe, and explain theories for conceptualizing human immortality, immortal beings, and life after death as developed across the long arc of Greco-Roman culture and further elaborated in the modern world (Quest 1, H). Assessments: Active class participation, reading quizzes, analytical paper, experiential learning component
- Identify, describe, and explain modern scholarly and scientific engagement with themes of immortality, and the scholarly methodologies involved (Quest 1, H). Assessments: Active class participation, reading quizzes, analytical paper

Critical Thinking: *Students carefully and logically analyse information from multiple perspectives and develop reasoned solutions to problems within the discipline(s).*

- Analyze how works across disciplines and genres from the ancient, early modern, and modern worlds represent immortal beings and the possibility of immortality. (Quest 1, H). **Assessments:** Analytical paper, active class participation.
- Analyze and assess the intellectual viability of competing philosophical and religious accounts of immortality. (Quest 1, H) **Assessment:** Active class participation, analytical paper
- Identify and analyze philosophical, scientific, and religious concepts of immortality as developed in fictional works of various genres. (Quest 1, H). **Assessment:** Active class participation, reading quizzes

Communication: *Students communicate knowledge, ideas and reasoning clearly and effectively in written and oral forms appropriate to the discipline(s).*

- Develop and articulate in writing clear and effective responses to central questions about the theme of immortality and its development over time. (Quest 1, H). **Assessments:** Analytical paper, experiential learning component

- Communicate clear, effective, and well-supported ideas and arguments, orally and in writing, about the philosophical and cultural significance of immortality (Quest 1, H). **Assessments:** Active class participation, analytical paper

Connection: *Students connect course content with meaningful critical reflection on their intellectual, personal, and professional development at UF and beyond.*

- Connect literary and intellectual themes of immortality with students' intellectual, personal, and professional lives at UF and beyond. (Quest 1). **Assessments:** Active class discussion, experiential learning component
- Reflect on the relevance and viability of concepts of immortality in modern life. (Quest 1). **Assessments:** Active class discussion, experiential learning component

VI. Quest Learning Experiences

1. Details of Experiential Learning Component

The flipside of immortality is mortality. People, times, places, even biological species all pass away. In this class, we have thought about life, death, and afterlife primarily in company with philosophers and writers of the past. In virtue of the fact that we still read them, every one of these people has gained a certain kind of immortality. What about the people—or animals—that have not attained general fame?

This experiential learning assignment invites you to think about the physical side of life, death, and remembrance. You may consider *any* artefact or building you wish. There are many examples on or near campus, or you could go outside Gainesville. I suggest visiting the Matheson History Museum (free, open Tuesday –Thursday, 513 East University Avenue) or the Harn Museum of Art (free to students and open all week, 3259 Hull Road). (The Florida Museum of Natural History, also free and located near the Harn Museum, is unfortunately closed at present.) Identify a display or object that you find particularly interesting for questions of mortality and immortality. Think broadly and creatively: this could be a work of art, images from local history, or a natural object.

You will then do **four** things:

1. Take two **pictures**. One will show the object/display directly. The other will show you with the object/display. (Most of you will have a digital camera on your smartphone or laptop. If you do not have access to a camera, let me know **at least three weeks before the due-date** and we will work out alternatives.)
2. Name the object/display.
3. Describe the setting in which the object/display appears, and say something about *what* it is. Where does the object/display come from, who made it, what does it represent, how old is it, etc.? This section should be at least **100 words** long, and may be longer if you need more space. **Treat museum display information like any other source. You may quote or paraphrase it, but should say that you are citing it, and add some commentary in your own words.**
4. Reflect on how this object/display relates to the themes we have discussed in class and to questions of immortality and mortality as they arise in the modern world. This section should be at least **400 words long** and must include **at least three citations from our course readings** (or, if appropriate, references to images discussed in class, for which you can refer to the PowerPoints uploaded on Canvas). **Citations do not need to follow a particular style-guide (MLA, Chicago, etc.), but should be to specific line, page, and/or section numbers, as explained in class.**

Submit these materials in one Word document via Canvas. Total length is to be at least **500 words**, plus the photos of the object/display. You may submit your report at any point in the semester, but are **required** to do so by 11:59 pm on **Friday, February 27 (week 7).**

2. Details of Self-Reflection Component

Self-reflection is built into key assignments, including the experiential learning component. In these opportunities for self-reflection offered by specific activities throughout the course, students will reflect on

the broader implications of the themes of the course, considering the impact to themselves and/or to a wider community.

VII. Required Policies and Helpful Guidelines

Academic Policies

All academic policies in this course are consistent with university policies, which can be found at: https://go.ufl.edu/syllabuspolicies