

Fresher/Sophister Module Description Template 2025-26

Full Name: “Dead but Dreaming”: Writing Undead Gods from Plutarch to Lovecraft

Short Name: Writing Undead Gods

Lecturer Name(s) and Email Address(es): Björn Quiring, quiringb@tcd.ie

ECTS Weighting: 10

Semester Taught MT/HT: MT

Year JF/SF/JS/SS: SS

Module Content:

In his *Moralia*, the Greek philosopher and priest Plutarch relates that, around the year 30 CE, some seamen sailing from Greece to Italy heard on their journey a mysterious, divine voice asking them to pass on the message that “the Great God Pan is dead”. This utterance, hence the subject of an extensive discussion, appears paradoxical, since gods are usually defined by their immortality.

However, the slow triumph of the monotheistic religions over paganism has often been represented as a process involving the death of the Greco-Roman gods, and the mysterious utterance reported by Plutarch has been interpreted accordingly. The problem is that a closer look at literary history will soon demonstrate that references to the pagan gods have since led a strange, persistent half-life within supposedly monotheist discourses, employing diverse rhetorical and poetical strategies to conceal or legitimate their “undead” insistence (by way of allegoresis, euhemerism, demonology etc.).

The process of secularization in Europe and its dependencies since the 17th century has instigated a similar decline and displacement of references to the Judeo-Christian God. But this decline, which reached one of its landmarks with Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous dictum that “God is dead”, likewise has been accompanied by the deity’s paradoxical persistence within language. First and foremost, the medium of writing seems to preserve some traits of a tenacious divine half-life, even under the auspices of atheism.

In the course of the term, we will try to analyse some aspects of this complex philosophical and theological topic and of its impact on literary history. Particular attention will be paid to the fantastic literature of the 19th and 20th century as a “post-religious” genre, and not least to the monstrous, undead gods in the horror stories of H. P. Lovecraft.

Learning Outcomes:

- Read selected literary texts from several literary epochs (John Donne, John Milton, Algernon Swinburne, Bram Stoker, Lord Dunsany, H. P. Lovecraft and others)
- Read selected theoretical texts on the philosophical, psychological and poetological aspects of divine life and death (Thomas Aquinas, G. W. F. Hegel, James G. Frazer, Sigmund Freud, Tzvetan Todorov, Jacques Derrida and others).
- Think about the relation between religion and literature.

Learning Aims:

- To gain a better understanding of secularisation and the ways it is processed in literary works.

Assessment Details:

- Number of Components: 1
- Name/Type of Component(s): 1 final essay
- Word Count of Component(s): 5000
- Percentage Value of Component(s): 100%

Preliminary Reading List:

- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Excerpts)
- Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion"
- Lord Dunsany, "The Journey of the King"
- Jacques Derrida, "Fors", *Life Death* (Excerpts)
- John Donne, "Holy Sonnets" (Excerpts), "Death's Duel"
- Gregory Erickson, "The Other Side of God"
- Henri Frankfort, "The Dying God"
- J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (Excerpts)
- Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo, The Uncanny* (Excerpts)
- G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Excerpts)
- Edward J. Ingelbrechtsen, *Maps of Heaven, Maps of Hell* (Excerpts)
- Adrian Johnston/Lorenzo Chiesa, *God is Undead* (Excerpts)
- Friedrich Kittler, "Dracula's Legacy"
- H. P. Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", "The Dreams in the Witch House", "The Haunter of the Dark", "The Other Gods"
- John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Excerpts)
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Science* (Excerpts)
- Jean Paul, "Speech of the Dead Christ"
- Plutarch, *Moralia: On the Failure of Oracles* (Excerpts)
- Psalm 82
- Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* (Excerpts)
- Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism* (Excerpts)
- Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Excerpts)
- Algernon Swinburne, "Hymn to Proserpine"
- Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Excerpts)

Please note:

- Curricular information is subject to change.
- Information is displayed only for guidance purposes, relates to the current academic year only and is subject to change.