It seems natural for us to love life and hate death -- to long, therefore, for immortality. But are human beings in any way immortal? If so, where do we go and what do we do? Is there an 'afterlife'? Are our souls reincarnated? And are we really right to fear death, or is this somehow childish and irrational? What exactly is it that we are so afraid of: the pain of dying, loss of the pleasures of this life, non-existence? Our fears and hopes about death and the afterlife depend on our whole worldview -- in particular, on our ideas about happiness, human nature and the divine.

Ancient authors think through these questions in both poetic and philosophical texts. Among the heroes of ancient epic, Gilgamesh searches for immortality; but Odysseus turns his back on it, and wants nothing more than an ordinary mortal life. The philosophers are all agreed that death is nothing to be feared, but they offer radically conflicting arguments as to why that is. In the Apology, Socrates claims not to know what happens after death (but is sure it cannot harm a good man); in the Phaedo, Plato argues that the soul is immortal. The Epicurean philosophers, Epicurus and Lucretius, argue instead that death is the end. We should not fear it because non-existence is not a bad thing: there is, after all, nobody for it to be bad for. These competing pictures of death and immortality go with different pictures of the soul, happiness, and our relation to the gods and the cosmos.

Tracking these ancient ideas about death and immortality will give us the opportunity to pursue two other goals as well. First, we will be reading some of the greatest works of ancient literature. To get the most out of multi-dimensional texts like Gilgamesh and the Apology, we will read them as wholes, not just focussing strictly on the theme of death and immortality; so we will be learning to read, closely and critically, several kinds of difficult texts from remote cultures. In dealing with poetic texts, the great challenge will be to extract themes, ideas, and even arguments without oversimplifying or losing the poetry. In dealing with philosophical works, we will
practice analysing and criticizing complex philosophical debates, figuring out which arguments are the most powerful. Second, this course will be an opportunity to develop and improve basic writing skills. A written assignment will be due each week, and progress in writing clearly and correctly should be one outcome of the course. The assignments will have to do with the readings to be discussed each week, so these goals of reading and writing will be integrated.

Readings:


These texts are available at the University of Toronto Bookstore. Further readings will be available as PDF's on Blackboard; these are marked with a * in the Schedule below. **Please be sure to use the assigned translations; translations of these texts vary hugely (and some are very bad), so using a different translation will definitely lead to confusion.**

Expectations and Evaluation:

Regular class attendance and participation is a course requirement. 'Attendance and participation' means attentive, respectful engagement with the course, the instructor and each other: arriving late and leaving early, non-course-related activities on your computer or cellphone, private chitchat, and other forms of rudeness will be penalized.

There will be a weekly writing assignment of approximately one page due each week in class at the start of class (no extensions, excuses, late submissions, or e-mail submissions permitted), except on the first day and on dates when a paper is due. Topics of the weekly assignments will be announced in class the previous week and posted on Blackboard. They will be graded but (for the most part) not commented on. **Writing assignments will be graded 'blind': please put your student number but not your name on your assignment.**

Attendance and participation: 10%
Weekly assignments (best 7 of 8): 20%
First paper (topics distributed Sept. 18, due Oct. 9, 4 pages): 20%
Second paper (topics distributed Oct. 9, due Oct. 30, 4-5 pages): 25%
Third paper (topics distributed Oct. 30, due Nov. 27, 5 pages): 25%
Tentative Schedule:

Week 1 (Wed. Sept. 11): Introduction to the Course; The Ancient Hero
Reading: Mitchell, 'Introduction' to Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh, esp. Books I-VI;

Week 2 (Wed. Sept. 18): Gilgamesh and the Quest for Immortality
Reading: Gilgamesh, esp. Books VII-XI

Week 3 (Wed. Sept. 25): Death and the Afterlife in the Greek World
Reading: Euripides, Alcestis; Homer, Odyssey Book XI; Homer, Iliad Book XXIII, lines 1-260*;

Reading: Homer, Odyssey Books I-VIII, esp. Books V-VIII

Week 5 (Wed. Oct. 9): Odysseus and the Magical World: Monsters, Temptations and the Underworld
Reading: Homer, Odyssey, Books IX-XIII

Week 6 (Wed. Oct. 16): Odysseus and the Hero's Triumph
Reading: Homer, Odyssey Books XIV-XXIV (XV, XX, XXIV may be skimmed)

Week 7 (Wed. Oct. 23): Socrates: Philosophy and Death
Reading: Plato, Apology

Week 8 (Wed. Oct. 30): Arguments for Immortality
Reading: Plato, Phaedo start-88c

Week 9 (Wed. Nov. 6): Platonic Argument and Myth
Reading: Plato, Phaedo 88c-end; other readings TBA*

Week 10 (Wed. Nov. 13): Epicureanism: why death is nothing to us
Reading: Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus, Letter to Menoeceus, Principal Doctrines, Vatican Sayings (=Texts 2, 4, 5 and 6 in The Epicurus Reader)

Week 11 (Wed. Nov. 20): Epicureanism: Lucretius on fear of death
Reading: Lucretius, On the Nature of Things excerpts*

Week 12 (Wed. Nov. 27): Alternative Immortalities
Reading: Plato, Symposium 201d-212c*; other readings TBA*