In this course, you will learn to write arguments. You will learn how to take a position and defend it. Though this sounds like a simple process, it turns out to be quite involved. Most people find it difficult to write a good argument; to do so requires practice, patience, and a willingness to question. I can’t promise that by the end of this course you’ll be able to argue like Socrates, but hopefully you’ll take some significant steps in that direction. By the end of the course, you should be able to take a clear position on an issue and find arguments to support that position, organize your ideas effectively, anticipate and respond to counterarguments, read your own papers objectively and critically, check your own grammar and sentence-structure, and develop strong persuasive techniques in your writing. Hopefully, too, you will begin to develop your own style, your own voice, so that your writing will be both convincing and aesthetically pleasing. And if you need work on basic grammar and sentence-structure, you should be able to improve in both these areas.

In the process, you’ll learn a lot about moral questions and learn how to discuss them more effectively. Though the focus of the course will be your writing, all writers need something to write about, an area to cover. In this course, your “area” is described in the course-title: we will be discussing moral questions that arise in works of fiction. Because you’ll be dealing with moral questions, you’ll learn to ask useful questions related to morals; you’ll also learn, sort of as a by-product, quite a bit about ethics. However, you will not study ethical theory per se. Though you will deal with what some will call “philosophical questions” related to ethics, this class will deal with your writing, not with philosophy per se.

You will write arguments that arise from your reading of specific works of fiction. You will write three major papers (and numerous drafts thereof). For the first, you will try to place a character into one of Lawrence Kohlberg’s six stages of moral development. For the second, you will ask whether a particular action by a particular character is moral or not. For your last paper, you will be writing a policy argument about a problematic situation arising at the end of a short novel.

You will also write at least three shorter papers. These papers will not deal with moral questions, but will serve as exercises encouraging you to work with some of the tools and skills relevant to argumentative writing (e.g. syllogisms, dealing with counter-arguments, grammar and sentence-structure, distinguishing between description/summary and argument).

In the first major paper, you will apply the ideas of Lawrence Kohlberg to Herman Melville’s novelette, Bartleby the Scrivener. In doing so, you will learn to organize your ideas as you link Kohlberg’s ideas to the narrator’s actions. The process for this paper may seem quite mechanical at first, but if you give yourself to the task, you will develop skills important to the writing of argument: how to make strong assertions; how to support those assertions with evidence; how to demonstrate the relevance of that evidence to the question.

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1 We will be using the terms “moral” and “ethical” quite often in this course. Though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, “moral” generally refers to actions, while “ethical” generally refers to a field of study or area of thought. Thus a person or an action may be moral or immoral. When we talk about “moral reasoning” or “moral arguments,” we are trying to come to a conclusion about a particular matter. On the other hand, when writers speak about “ethical theories,” they are referring not to specific cases but to ways of reasoning about cases in general.
working on the first two papers.

**** You’ll have at least three of these.

***** If I don’t give any quizzes on the readings, your grade will first be calculated on a 90-point scale, then recalculated on a 100-point scale.

****** You’ll have two grammar quizzes, one early in the term and one at the end. You can take the higher grade of the two. You must get at least 60% on one of these quizzes in order to pass the course. You must get at least 70% on one of them in order to get a “C” in the course.

II. ATTENDANCE: Attendance is mandatory. You are allowed three absences. Each additional absence after that may lower your final grade: a C could become a C- if you have 4 absences, a D+ if you have 5 absences, and so on. You are responsible for all work missed due to absence. I am not responsible for chasing you down. Those arriving after the roll has been taken may attend class, but every two such instances may count as one absence. If you arrive late, it’s your responsibility to make sure I’ve marked you present.

If you’re laid low with an illness for a week or more (using up all your absences), discuss your situation with me.

III. WORKLOAD: You’ll be writing three major papers and three or four minor ones. You may also be asked to write short summaries or critiques of various essays.

IV. LATE PAPERS: Late papers will be accepted, but they will be marked down at the rate of one grade-increment for every day late. (For example, if the paper is due at 10:00 AM Monday and you turn it in at 10:01, your A turns into an A-. It turns into a B+ at the same time Tuesday, and so forth.) Deadlines are important for any writer, so I take them seriously. Sometimes the pressure of a deadline forces a writer to produce quality work. (I have heard that the pressure of deadlines has driven some writers to drink, but these cases have been mostly on the East Coast.)

V. PARTICIPATION: The class is a workshop, so you will be expected to participate, reading and orally critiquing your classmates’ work.

VI. PLAGIARISM: Plagiarism will not be tolerated in any form. A paper that is plagiarized in whole or in part will receive an F. The student who plagiarizes may be asked to leave the course.

VII. GRAMMAR AND SPELLING: If more than two spelling or grammatical errors occur in your final paper, your grade may suffer. An A paper may become an A- with the third error, a B+ with the fourth, a B with the fifth, and so forth. Because drafts are not graded, students often say, “Oh yeah, I know. I won’t make that mistake on my final paper.” Alas, they often do make “that mistake” on their final papers. Great sadness results! I would therefore recommend that you make every effort to write and spell correctly on your drafts. Like cigarette smoking, good writing is habit forming.

VIII. TEXTS: “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” by Herman Melville; The Gate to Women’s Country, by Sheri S. Tepper; “Houston, Houston, Do You Read?” by James T. Tiptree, Jr. “Bartleby” and “Houston” are in the Library Reserve. You will need to purchase a copy of
The Gate to Women’s Country. You can get it fairly quickly through Amazon.com. Also, Duska and Whelan’s “Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development,” available in the Library Reserve.

IX. LIMITS: I reserve the right to limit the number of times I critique your papers. Most likely, I will critique no more than one version of your first paragraph, one version of each of your support-sections, and one version of your conclusion. An in-class critique counts as one of these critiques.

X. SUNDARY: All written work (including drafts) must be typed and double-spaced. Typed work has been shown to improve the disposition of university teachers, and sometimes the clarity of student writing as well. You will often need to provide a copy of your draft for each class-member. Please hand in two copies of the final version of each major paper.

I may not accept a final paper for which I have not seen at least three preliminary drafts. It is your responsibility to turn in drafts.

X. DISABILITIES: If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit to me a letter from Disability Services in a timely manner so that your needs may be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities (303-492-8671, Willard 322, www.colorado.edu/disabilityservices).

XI. Ever since the dim times, course guidelines in American universities have been written to sound harsh and unfeeling. In order to uphold tradition, I have made every effort to make these guidelines sound as harsh and unfeeling as possible. Remember, though, that guidelines exist so that the subject matter of the course might be mastered and so that we have a basis for negotiation should disagreements arise. Even in the twenty-first century, people are more important than policies, though sometimes we profit from policies that prod us toward perfection. Still, policies often need to be tempered, the vicissitudes of life being many and diverse.

Office hours: to be arranged
Office phone: 303 735-0823 (If you need to reach me, please do not use the WRTG main office number.)
Office location: Temporary Building #1, the room at the head of the stairs, just to your left as you enter the building.
Email: garudadragon1@aol.com. (If you use my university email account, do not expect a response during this century.)

3 I’d recommend doing so soon. If I had a dime for every student who put off getting a copy until it was too late, I’d be able to retire from teaching, purchase a yacht, and travel around the world writing my memoirs.