At the heart of literature, cinema, and creative work generally, there lies a moral paradox. On the one hand, artistic activities like the writing of literature are seen to be a “good.” “Great literature” and “great cinema” is often argued to contain, or convey, or be, what is “best” and most “valuable” in the human spirit. Yet at the same time, all of the “great” literary texts and films are rife with morally dubious matter: bad things happen to good people; good people do bad things; good people turn out not to be so good after all. The result is that many literary and cinematic texts contain a great deal of inexplicable pain and suffering, and morally questionable behavior. What is the point of this? Above all, how can the depiction of such evil—which in many texts seems to be fundamentally unredeemed in moral terms—be reconciled with the view of literature and art as a repository of all that is best about human experience?

Working from this basic paradox, this course will explore some of the morally troubling aspects of literary texts and films. We’ll be looking at some well-known stories and short novels, as well as a small number of films. We’ll begin from the basics of storyline, and examine some of the ways in which narratives force us to reexamine our own ideas of good and bad behavior. Then we will dig deeper and consider other aspects of the experience of reading and viewing. How do writers choose to tell their stories—who is the narrator, how is the story constructed, and how is language used? How do filmmakers, in turn, use the conventions and possibilities of the medium to convey their stories? Throughout, the emphasis will be on teasing out various facets of the central paradox outlined above. Given their frequent portrayal of bad behavior, suffering, and misfortune, what in fact is good about literary texts and films? We’ll begin to realize that the “goodness” of “good books” and “good movies” is not what we might expect it to be.