This class meets with CMLT-C 200.

What is a good life? The question of how one ought to live one’s life is at the center of a long tradition of practical philosophy. In the West, the principal approaches were sketched out by the ancient Greeks, who first distinguished between such concepts as “pleasure,” “happiness,” and “goodness,” and charted the possible relations between them. Less systematic but more nuanced than philosophy, literary texts often revolve around the same question, but they tend to focus more on personal choices and the particular circumstances under which they are made. Starting with the Greek philosophic Epicurus, who defined true happiness as freedom from anxiety and pain, this course will take up three imaginative writers whose reflections on how to live were inseparable from their reflections on writing itself: Montaigne, who responded to the civil wars of sixteenth-century France by inventing the literary “essay”; Thoreau, who withdrew to the isolation of Walden Pond in an effort to live “authentically”; and Henry James, who represented the conflict between old-world pleasures through the eyes of a fictional alter in his late novel The Ambassadors. All three, in their different ways espoused an ideal of personal integrity—of fidelity to one’s own nature—which they defended against the pressures of conformity and self-interest.

WRITTEN WORK

- One paper focusing on a particular passage (an early version of which must be presented and defended in class)
- Final exam