

ENGL 3404: Studies in Popular Texts  
“Popular Texts and the Meaning of Life”  
Dr. Carey Mickalites

**Class Meetings:** MW, 2:20 – 3:45

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## Course Description

In their *Handbook to Literature* Holman and Harmon define “popular literature” as:

Writing in one of the commercially viable modes, especially prose fiction. This literature is valued on a strictly quantitative bases—number of copies sold. It is both creature and creator of popular taste, and it may be a more reliable index of what the majority of people really have on their minds. . . . Retrospectively, we can sometimes recognize that a Shakespeare or a Dickens was conforming to the demands of the *popular literature* of an earlier time.<sup>1</sup>

As this definition implies, popular works are also often associated with conservative cultural values and social norms: they reflect and reproduce “what the majority of people really have on their minds.” Using this general definition as a starting point, we will study a range of texts (literature, cinema, comics, etc.) that were either produced for a popular market or that draw on popular forms within a more avant-garde medium. As my slightly tongue-in-cheek subtitle for the course suggests, each of the works we will study in some way raises the impossible question concerning “the meaning of life” for their own particular time period and the social conditions in which they were produced and received. As we address this set of concerns within specific thematic units, we will also ask if artists wrote in popular modes in ways that merely reinforced social norms, or somehow unsettled or questioned them or, perhaps, both at the same time. For example, while many of these works are intended to be popular, they also often deploy themes or characters that are weird, twisted, or downright freaky.

## Texts and Other Materials (in order of discussion):

J.M. Barrie, *The Little White Bird*

Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

Monty Python’s *The Life of Brian* (film, provided)

Charles Chaplin, *A Dog’s Life* (film, provided)

*Krazy Kat: The Comic Art of George Herriman*, eds. Patrick McDonnell et al.

*Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control* (film, dir. Errol Morris, provided)

H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*

*The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (film, dir. Garth Jennings, provided)

(\*\*And other short readings or films that I will provide along the way.)

**Work for the Class:** A short paper (4 pp), a longer term paper (7-8 pp), regular homework, and in-class activities.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 368.