

Literary Criticism

ENGL 394
Spring 2007
TR 12:25-1:55

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Course Description

This class asks you to think about the theoretical foundations of literary and cultural studies. In other words, how do we do what we do as readers and students of literature, and why do we do it in these kinds of ways? This class isn't designed to teach you every school or movement of literary and cultural theory. Rather it is designed to get you to think in theoretical kinds of ways, to ask theoretical kinds of questions by engaging with the ways others have engaged the foundations of our discipline. Because we orient ourselves to the various facets of everyday life through narrative, metaphor, representation, communication and interpretation, this class also ultimately investigates the relationship between culture and our everyday lives. While we will touch on some of the classical monuments of theorizing about literature, our emphasis will be on the literary and cultural theory of the past fifty years. We will ask how our current practices as students of culture are guided by theoretical assumptions, and we will ask how becoming aware of different literary and cultural theories changes the way we think about ourselves as readers, writers, and thinkers.

Course Goals

- To encourage you to think theoretically about practices and artifacts that we often assume are as natural to us as breathing: Reading, Writing, and Literature.
- To introduce you to the kinds of questions posed by cultural and literary theorists, and to sketch the tremendous variety of answers that theorists offer for those questions.
- To help you become more sophisticated thinkers and writers about literature and culture.
- To help you improve your skills as writers of persuasive/argumentative essays.
- To help you apply your thinking about theory to thinking about your life and your faith.

Course Objectives

Reading: Almost all of our reading will be in literary and, secondarily, cultural theory. In some respects this material constitutes reading in the philosophy of literature, though the subject matter includes a great deal more than philosophy classically considered. Expect to take extra time to read what will often be dense, complex material. Your reading will be assessed primarily through daily writing and class participation.

Writing: Because writing is a means of discovery and a pathway to understanding, it is the most important activity in the class next to reading. Indeed, you should think of your writing as a mode of reading that will help you begin understanding and employing the difficult processes of theoretical thought. When all assignments are considered together you will be doing some kind of writing assignment nearly every day.

- **Daily Writing**--As a kind of formal journal, on most days you will turn in a daily assignment that reflects on the reading for the day. These daily assignments should respond to one of the following three questions: 1) How would I summarize today's essay in my own words? 2) In what ways is this essay similar to or different from previous essays we have read? 3) Do I agree or disagree with the arguments made in this particular essay and why? As much reasonably possible your daily writing should cite and talk about specific passages from our text. At the end of your daily writing you should include one question about the reading assignment that you would like to discuss in class. Daily writings should be on one side of one sheet of paper. You may use spacing, fonts and margins that are smaller than the normal MLA guidelines if you choose to do so. These will be graded with a plus, check or minus. Cumulative excellence will add five points to your class participation grade; Cumulative weakness will subtract five points from your class participation grade.

- **Critical Analyses:** In the first half of the semester, each of you will write one critical analysis of an essay in preparation for a day's reading. This essay will provide a basis for that day's class discussion. The purposes of a critical analysis is to understand what an author is saying. The critical analysis should pursue some or all of the following questions: What is the main question at issue that this essay is trying to answer? Why is this question important? How does he develop the form and structure of the argument? What kinds of evidence does she offer in support of the conclusions? What are the assumptions the author must rely on in pursuing her line of argument? What questions are left unasked or unanswered? How does the author explicitly or implicitly answer the following questions: What is an author? What is literature? What is reading?

Critical analyses should be between 900 and 1200 words long. On the day that your critical analysis is due, you do not have to turn in a daily writing assignment. Critical Analyses are worth 50 points.

- **Response Essays:** In the second half of the semester, each of you will write one response essay in preparation for discussion of the day's reading. Whereas the critical analysis is primarily designed to demonstrate understanding, the response essay is designed to encourage your entry into a theoretical conversation. Unlike the critical analyses, in which you are striving primarily to understand what a theorist is saying, in the response essays you are responding with ideas of your own. The focus then may end up being where you agree or disagree with the theorist, or how you understand the consequences and implications of their work for a related area of inquiry. The central question for your response essay is "How should we respond to what this theorist is saying?" You could be concerned with the following kinds of questions and others: Do you agree with the main question the writer is trying to answer and why? Is there a relevant question that the theorist has not considered that we should be pursuing? What are the consequences for believing what this theorist proposes? Are the assumptions that the theorist makes justified?

Response Essays should be between 900 and 1500 words long. On the day that your response essay is due, you do not have to turn in a daily assignment. Response essays are worth 100 points.

- **Final essay including research:** Your final essay should take up a question at issue that falls broadly into the parameters of the main questions posed by the course: What is an Author? What is Literature? What is Reading? Your final essay is worth 150 points. This essay should follow these general parameters.
- Demonstrate significant engagement with one or more assigned readings
 - Demonstrate some engagement with secondary readings from either our text or from other texts you read. To judge this parameter, your final essay should include a works cited or works consulted page. Works that have not been assigned in class should include a short summary annotation.
 - Demonstrate mastery of the principles of persuasive/ argumentative writing. John Gage's *The Shape of Reason* serves as my baseline in evaluating your success in this area, but many other books work easily as well.
 - Be approximately 2000 words long. It may be longer if you choose, but length won't help your grade.

Final Exam Period: Your final paper is due by the end of the final exam period or earlier. There will be no final exam for this class.

Participation: Beyond the daily writing and reading indicated above, participation includes the following: regular attendance, attentive concern for others' ideas or questions; consistent respect for others as expressed through demeanor, engagement of ideas whether you agree with them or oppose them, and the genuine effort to help others improve their writing and thinking; oral expression of your own ideas; preparation for class through careful and critical reading of assigned material; prompt completion of assignments. Participation in class is worth 100 points

Course Mechanics:

Necessary Study Skills: I am guided by the principles that a college education is a full-time occupation and that a typical spring semester load is 13 credits. With this in mind, you should be able to complete the course successfully if you devote approximately 10 hours a week to class time and to the reading and writing requirements. Consistent reading is imperative since understanding early readings in the course is necessary for understanding later readings in the course and for successfully completing your final essay. Further, planning and working ahead will save you from desperate, anxiety-driven despair toward the end of the semester.

Format: Except as otherwise specified above. All essays should follow the MLA guidelines for writers of research papers. All essays, excluding daily assignments, should include a Works Cited page and provide page citations as appropriate. Copies of the MLA style manual are in the library in the reference section and are available on line. Let me caution you to be especially wary of plagiarism. Remember that plagiarism is the use of another person's words or ideas without giving proper credit to that person. Plagiarized essays

will be failed. If you do not understand what plagiarism is or may be, please see me immediately.

Late papers: Late critical readings will not receive credit. A late short essay will be penalized 10 points for each day late, lateness being construed as anytime after the papers are collected on the day they are due in class. A late final essay will be penalized 30 points for each day late. I do offer extensions for documented medical problems and family crises. In exceptional circumstances I offer extensions for otherwise overwhelming curricular requirements (that is, if you have three major papers due on the same day I am amenable to adjustments in your schedule). However, in all cases, to receive an extension you must contact me at the first possible moment that you realize something will be late, preferably at least a day before the day something is due. I do not offer extensions because of student involvement in extracurricular activities.

Grading: At the end of the semester your grade will be based on a percentage of points earned out of 400. I use the following scale to determine grades: A \geq 95; A- 91-94; B+ 88-90; B 85-87; B- 81-84; C+ 78-80; C 74-77; C- 71-73; D+ 68-70; D 64-67; D- 61-63; F \leq 60

Texts: Vincent Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*
Miscellaneous handouts and web pages

Schedule: *Subject to change as necessary*

Date	Topic
2/6	Introduction to Class; What is Theory?
What is an Author?	
2/8	Is the author a divine seer? Emerson 717-739 (See also Plato, Horace, and Longinus)
2/13	Is the author relevant? Eliot 1088—98 (See also Wimsatt and Beardsley)
2/15	Is the author a function of discourse? Barthes 1457-61
2/20	Is the author a function of discourse? Foucault 1616-36
2/22	Is the author male? Pizan 263-270; Woolf 1017—29
2/27	Is the author male? Gilbert and Gubar 2021—34 (See also Cixous)
What is Literature?	
3/1	Is literature form? Eichenbaum 1058-1087 (See also Wimsatt and Beardsley)
3/6	Is literature discourse? Barthes 1470-1475
3/8	Is literature discourse? Bakhtin 1186-1219
3/13	Is Literature a deception? Williams 1565-75, Eagleton 2240-2249 (See also Plato, Woolf, Achebe)
3/15	Is Literature deception? Ohmann 1877-97 (See also Hurston)
3/17-25	Spring Break
3/27	Is Literature a resource for personal and social liberation? Shelley 695—716 (See also Arnold)
3/29	Is Literature a resource for personal and social liberation? DuBois 977-87; Ngugi 2089—97
What is Reading?	
4/3	Is reading evaluation? Hume 483—99 (See also Kant and Burke)
4/5	Is reading evaluation? Bourdieu 1806-1814
4/10	Is reading evaluation? Herrnstein Smith 1910-1936
4/12	Is reading objective decoding? Augustine 185-195, Aquinas 240-245
4/17	Is reading objective decoding? Hirsch 1682-1708
4/19	Service Day, no class
4/24	Is reading ethical? Clarence Walhout (On Reserve)
4/26	Is reading ethical? Alan Jacobs (On Reserve)
5/1	Is reading creative Thiselton (On Reserve)
5/3	Can reading be ethical and creative? Powers work in progress (To be distributed)
5/8	Work on final papers
Finals	Final Papers Due to my office by 12:30 p.m., Thursday 10 May 2007

