

English 390

Literary Theory

Spring 2012

MW 3:30PM – 4:45PM, Oddfellows 221
Prof. Ryan S Paul (rpaul@allgheny.edu)
Office: Oddfellows 213 (x2320)
Office Hours: T/Th, 2:00PM – 5:00PM

According to Hamlet, the purpose of art “is to hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.” As literary critics, our job is to describe what we see in that mirror, to transform the imaginative representations of texts into language and concepts that can be understood not only on a personal and emotional level but also on an intellectual one. We take the implicit and make it explicit, unfold the compressed, and uncover the veiled.

In order to express the complex meanings within these artistic mirrors, we must learn the right words to describe what we see and experience. Each of the various analytical methods identified by the name “theory” provides its own critical vocabulary; like a lens that brings what had been invisible or obscure into focus, these different vocabularies allow us to see and describe the diverse elements, actions, and relations that create meaning in texts.

The purpose of this class is to introduce students to the critical vocabularies that have become prevalent in literary discourse in recent decades. While we will discuss many of the major “schools” of criticism (e.g. structuralism, deconstruction, psychoanalytic theory, Marxist theory, cultural studies, queer theory, gender studies, etc.) our focus will be primarily on the questions at the heart of all literary study: philosophical inquiries about the nature, location, and creation of meaning. We will read a number of the major works of literary theory, discussing the applications and limits of their works and how disparate, even conflicting theories can be productively combined to generate powerful new insights. By the end of the semester, we will have expanded both our understanding of literature and the tools at our disposal to analyze and understand it in multiple dimensions.

This class is appropriate for all English Majors/Minors and any other students interested in critical theory, although it is designed with advanced students in mind, particularly those who are considering graduate study. Students should be confident and skilled close-readers; students should also have strong analytical and writing skills. Most importantly, students should be open-minded. Critical theory challenges many of our common assumptions, and students should be ready for – and excited by – the opportunity to scrutinize conventional ideas about identity, authorship, language, and the purpose of literature.



Course Texts

Leitch, Vincent B. et al, eds. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. 2nd Edition. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010.

Eliot, T.S. *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*. 2nd Edition. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

David Lynch, Dir. *Mulholland Dr.* Universal Pictures, 2001. (Screening TBA)

This film is rated R and contains material that some might consider objectionable, including explicit depictions of sex and violence. If you think this will be a problem for you, please speak to me ASAP.

Additional readings to be provided.

Assignments & Grading

Response Papers: 20%

Presentations: 30% (10% each)

Papers: 40% (20% each)

Class Participation: 10%

You will do a significant amount of writing in this class. Each student will write several short (1-2pp) response papers to our readings in theory and criticism. These response papers will serve as the basis for our in class conversations, and students are encouraged to experiment in their approaches to these papers: personal responses, questions, comparisons with other texts, applications to literary or popular texts, etc.

Students will also write two analytical papers, employing the ideas developed in class in the analysis of a literary text. Students are free to write about one of the texts discussed in class or to choose a different object of analysis, **subject to my approval**. Students who wish to apply the ideas from this course to their work in another course may do so, but only with the express approval of the other professor. I encourage students who are working on their Senior Project or Senior Project Proposal to consider applying the work of this course to that assignment – again, with the express approval of their committee.

Active participation in class discussion and activities is essential for your success and the success of the class as a whole. You should come to class every day prepared and excited to engage with the material and your fellow students.

In addition to daily participation, each student will make three presentations over the course of the semester. Everyone will serve as discussion leader for one class; as part of this duty, you will be responsible for engaging your classmates with the assigned reading for that day, including making a short presentation on the text, devising group or individual activities, and crafting questions and topics that will spur conversation. For the second presentation, each student will research a specific theorist, text, or school and discuss their research with the class. For example, students may decide to focus on a particular figure or text not discussed in class, to read additional texts by a particular author we have studied, or to discuss in more depth a particular theoretical field, including its major figures, strengths and weaknesses of its methods, and so forth. For the third presentation, each student will select an object – a poem, a popular film, television show, etc. – and discuss it with the class in light of some theoretical concept.

Students with disabilities who believe they may need accommodations in this class are encouraged to contact Disability Services at (814) 332-2898. Disability Services is part of the Learning Commons and is located in Pelletier Library. Please do this as soon as possible to ensure that such accommodations are implemented in a timely fashion.

Weekly Syllabus

Before our first class meeting, I will distribute the following readings to each of you. Please be prepared to discuss them on day one.

W 1/18 Introduction to the course; What is Theory?
Pre-Reading: Jonathan Culler, "What is Theory?" & "Appendix: Theoretical Schools and Movements" from *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*

The Authority of the Text

M 1/23 W.K. Wimsatt, "The Intentional Fallacy"
T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

W 1/25 Cleanth Brooks, "The Language of Paradox" (handout), "The Heresy of Paraphrase"

M 1/30 Formalism & New Criticism – Strengths & Weaknesses

Authors and Readers

W 2/2 Challenging the Author
Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?"
Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author"

M 2/6 Empowering the Reader
Wolfgang Iser, "Interaction between Text and Reader"

W 2/8 Marginalized Readers
Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (excerpts)
Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism"

Meaningful Structures: Language

M 2/13 The Linguistic Turn
Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*
Martin Heidegger, "Language"

W 2/15 Structuralism
Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Structural Analysis in Linguistics and in Anthropology" (CP)

M 2/20 Structure and Gender
Monique Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman"

The Human in Language

- W 2/22 The Instability of Language
Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense"
- M 2/27 –
2/29 The Unconscious
Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "The Uncanny," "Fetishism"
- M 3/5 –
3/7 The Symbolic Domain
Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," "The Agency of the Letter," "The Signification of the Phallus"
- M 3/12 –
W 3/14 Deconstructing Meaning
Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign & Play," "Force and Signification," and "Differance"
(all handouts)
- W 3/14 Paper 1 Due**
- 3/19 – 3/23 Spring Break**
- M 3/26 –
W 3/28 Non-Speakers
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Ideologies Economic and Otherwise

- M 4/2 –
W 4/4 Marxism & Ideology
Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, The German Ideology*, "Commodities", Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure"
- M 4/9 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"
Matthew Arnold, "Sweetness and Light"
- W 4/11 The Construction of the West
Edward Said, "Orientalism"
- M 4/16 –
W 4/18 Sexual Ideologies
Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*
- M 4/23 Sexual Deviance
Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality"
Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Between Men"
- W 4/25 Student Presentations
- M 4/30 Student Presentations
- Tu 5/8 Paper 2 Due**