

ENG 8070: Contemporary Literary Theory

Spring Semester 99

MW 9:30-10:45 707 GCB

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Course Purpose:

This course is a graduate-level introduction to and survey of contemporary literary theory from Saussure to the present. It will examine the following critical fields: semiotics, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, Marxism, cultural studies, postcolonialism, feminism, gender studies, and queer theory. The course presupposes no prior knowledge of any of these theories on your part; it is designed for the “beginning” literary theorist. And yet, whatever our respective levels of exposure, the material we will be working through this semester will be difficult and challenging: there is no contemporary literary theory that doesn’t answer to that description.

Why is theory so difficult? I will let some comments by Thomas McLaughlin, in his introduction to Critical Terms for Literary Study, serve as a provisional answer:

The very project of theory is unsettling. It brings assumptions into question. It creates more problems than it solves. And, to top it off, it does so in what is often a forbidding and arcane style. . . . [But] theory isn’t difficult out of spite. It is difficult because it has proceeded on the premise that language itself ought to be its focus of attention; that ordinary language is an embodiment of an extremely powerful and usually unquestioned system of values and beliefs; and that using ordinary language catches you up in that system. Any discourse that was to uncover and question that system had to find a language, a style, that broke from the constraints of common sense and ordinary language. Theory set out to produce texts that could not be processed successfully by the commonsensical assumptions that ordinary language puts into play. There are texts of theory that resist meaning so powerfully--say those of Lacan or Kristeva--that the very process of failing to comprehend the text is part of what it has to offer. (2)

McLaughlin goes on to say that “the experience of theory . . . ought to engage the reader in a struggle over language and with language” (3). Given McLaughlin’s emphasis on struggle and failure, what I might say here in regard to theory’s difficulty is that theory is an always unsettling, always paradoxical attempt to transform knowledge, and to produce new knowledge, through pushing knowledge to the point of its productive failure or collapse. In terms of your negotiation of theory in this course, then, what will “count” will be the level of your engagement, your experience, your struggle with the difficulties theory has to offer. You will not be expected to “master” these discourses--indeed, for some of them, “mastery” itself is precisely what is thrown into question.

Having gone on at such length about the difficulties of theory, let me stress that it isn't simply incomprehensible. My guiding pedagogical philosophy about theory is that if I can deal with it--that is, understand it well enough to make it a part of my own critical disposition--then just about anyone can. Despite its discursive flights and arabesques or labyrinthine plummets, most theory can be brought close enough to earth to be explicable. But since the experience of theory is, or ought to be, a struggle over language and with language, the best way to explicate theory is to put it into one's own words (with the understanding that one's "own words" will never exactly be one's own again, if indeed they ever were). What this means is that you will be asked to do a bit of writing.

Course requirements:

The ordinary requirements in a graduate seminar are a presentation and a lengthy seminar paper. In this course, because few of you have extensive experience with theory or writing about it, I prefer to ask you to write a series of shorter papers. Rather than one 25-page research paper, then, you will be writing five 5-page papers over the course of the semester. These will be critical response papers in which you examine and explicate some particular issue or formulation arising from the specific reading at hand. So, for example, you might take a particular passage from Lacan and "unpack" it; or you might attempt to justify, or explode, Derrida's assertion that his neologism "différance" is "neither a word nor a concept." In any case, these papers are due on the following dates: 2/8, 3/1, 3/22, 4/5, and 4/19. Their advantage over the research paper is that I do not expect you to find secondary sources. You may, of course, choose to explore such sources (we all need all the help we can get), but you are not required to.

In addition to the five short papers, there will be a comprehensive, take-home final examination. I will give you the questions on the last day of class (4/28) and your responses will be due in my office at the date and time of the final.

Texts:

Richter, The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends, 2nd Edition. (R)

Rivkin and Ryan, Literary Theory: An Anthology (R&R)

In addition to these required texts, you may want to consult the following very useful texts::

Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction

Jonathan Culler, Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction

Childers and Hentzi, eds., The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism.

Reading Schedule:

The following may be subject to revision.

- 1/11: Introductions
- 1/13: Richter, "Structuralism, Semiotics, Deconstruction"
Culler, "The Linguistic Foundation" (R&R)
Saussure, "Course in General Linguistics" (R&R)
- 1/18: MLK Birthday: No Class
- 1/20: Rivkin and Ryan, "The Class of 68--Post-Structuralism par lui-même"
Selections by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Bataille (R&R)
- 1/25: Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (R)
- 1/27: Derrida, "Différance" (R&R)
- 2/1: Richter, "Foucault: Archaeologies and Genealogies, Power and Knowledge" (R,
1208-1212)
Foucault, "What is an Author?" (R), "Archeology of Knowledge" (R&R)
- 2/3: Foucault, "Discipline and Punish" (R&R), "History of Sexuality" (R, R&R)
- 2/8:** Richter, "Psychoanalytic Criticism"
Rivkin and Ryan, "Strangers to Ourselves: Psychoanalysis"
Freud, "Interpretation of Dreams," "On Narcissism" (R&R)
First paper due
- 2/10: Freud, "The Uncanny," "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (R&R)
Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot" (R)
- 2/15: Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," "The Symbolic Order" (R&R)
- 2/17: Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud" (R)
Gallop, "Reading Lacan" (R)
- 2/22: Kristeva, "Psychoanalysis and the Polis" (R), "Revolution in Poetic Language"
(R&R)
- 2/24: Deleuze and Guattari, "The Anti-Oedipus," "A Thousand Plateaus" (R&R)
- 3/1:** Richter, "Marxist Criticism"

Rivkin and Ryan, "Starting With Zero: Basic Marxism"
All selections by Hegel and Marx (R&R)

Second paper due

3/3: Althusser, "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus" (R&R)
Fiske, "Culture, Ideology, Interpellation" (R&R)

3/15: Gramsci, "Hegemony" (R&R)
Williams, "Marxism and Literature" (R)

3/17: Jameson, "The Political Unconscious" (R)

3/22: Richter, "New Historicism and Cultural Studies"
Rivkin and Ryan, "The Politics of Culture"
Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry as Mass Deception"
Third paper due

3/24: Hall, "The Rediscovery of Ideology" (R&R)

3/29: Rivkin and Ryan: "English Without Shadows: Literature on a World Scale"
Said, "Orientalism" (R, and R&R)

3/31: Morrison, "Playing in the Dark," Bhabha, "The Location of Culture" (R&R)

4/5: Richter, "Feminist Literary Criticism"
Rivkin and Ryan, "Feminist Paradigms"
Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy of Sex'" (R&R)
Fourth paper due

4/7: Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (R), "Sorties" (R&R)

4/12: Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine,"
"Commodities amongst Themselves" (R&R), "This Sex Which Is Not One" (R)

4/14: Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (R, or R&R)
Note: View Alfred Hitchcock's films Rear Window and Vertigo

4/19: Richter, "Gender Studies and Queer Theory"
Rivkin and Ryan, "Contingencies of Gender"
De Lauretis, "The Technology of Gender"
Fifth paper due

4/21: Sedgwick, "Between Men" (R&R), "Epistemology of the Closet" (R)

4/26: Edelman, "Homographesis" (R, or R&R)
Warner, "Homo-Narcissism; or, Heterosexuality" (R)

4/28: Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination"
Final exam questions distributed

5/5: **Final exam responses due, my office, 12:00 noon**