

FALL 2012

Prof. Kenneth Sherwood

ENGL 676-001

Critical Approaches to Literature

Thursdays 6:00 pm-8:45 pm LENRD 202

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Overview

This course will introduce students to concepts and practices in critical theory. Emphases will be on concepts such as author, culture, subjectivity, and ideology which inform or cut across various theoretical schools. You will practice doing and "thinking" theory in your class blogs, oral discussion, and formal writing. Class readings in theory will primarily be introductory or secondary materials. Students will have the opportunity to delve more deeply into a single "area," reading primary texts for a final project. You can expect to develop interpretive/analytical habits of use for future coursework in any genre or period, but I will select a handful of contemporary American fiction, poetry, and hybrid-genre texts for shared analysis.

Required Texts:

Theory Toolbox. Nealon and Giroux, Rowman Littlefield 2011.

Critical Terms for Literary Study. Ed. Lentricchia. U Chicago 1995. ISBN
9780226472034

See ALSO: Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Criticism and Theory (IUP Library
Databases)

Assignments:

Oral Participation, Preparedness, and Weekly Written Responses (30%)

(weekly)

Got a theory migraine? Careful reading and informal writing should help prepare you to contribute during each class. Some of these works will be challenging and, perhaps, confusing. I expect you to be prepared to articulate your own points of difficulty with a text in the form of questions. I will be looking for signs of your genuine engagement with the readings; it is your responsibility to show me through that you have made an effort to work through any problems you encounter for all

readings, the easy and the difficult, those you love and those you don't!

Errors, incomplete knowledge, and confusion will occur, and I'm fine with them. But dismissal and disengagement are not.

Participation includes weekly posting of responses to Moodle. This course will be driven by your forays, queries, and intellectual commitments. I ask that each week, in preparation for the class, you post your reflections on readings. Consider this an exploratory and dialogic space. Better to delve deeply into an issue that interests you than to try to "cover" everything we've read; better to extend or complicate the ongoing thread of discussion than talk only to yourself. Please post at least once on the week's readings before Wednesday at 10pm.

You may post more than once, and you may also find it useful to share post-class responses as we move from week to week. During the week, if you have questions about the reading, you can share them with the class and maybe you'll get some helpful answers. But please post at least one "original" discussion of reading prior to class.

Please also note that your participation and posting must be thorough and consistent. Brilliant posts for 10 weeks and nothing for 4 others will not be viewed favorably!

Class Discussion Questions: 20%

For each class meeting, I will assign one or more students to generate questions for discussion. These should be informed, carefully articulated to allow us to talk, as a group, about the key issues we confront in that week's reading.

When you or your group have prepared the questions, you will share them with the class through Moodle; you will also lead the discussion so that your Prof. doesn't take over!

We'll discuss and decide as a class whether the DQs should be done in collaborative groups or individually; and we'll decide whether one group should be responsible for all the readings / literature for the class period or if it should be split up.

Concept Essay (20%)

(Due – Oct 25)

For this shorter essay (4-8 pp), write in expository fashion about a theoretical concept of interest to you and synthesize several sources. *Gender. What does it mean to hold*

that gender is constructed? Why is this significant? What are its consequences? The concept may be one of those assigned or something we don't treat as a class; you may explore a contested concept in terms of multiple perspectives, engaging in an ongoing debate (eg. Marxist vs. Feminist perspectives on identity) or you may choose to delve more deeply into a single perspective on a topic. See *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. At least one of your sources (3 min.) should be a "primary" theory text. You do not need to break new theoretical ground. Your goal is to gain fluency, to practice thinking with and through the paradigms of theory. Please DO NOT "apply" theory to a literary text for this assignment!

Final Project (30 %)

(Due – Dec 6; 1 page proposal Nov 15)

For this essay, you may also choose to (a.) revise and extend the discussion you began with your concept essay; (b.) develop the ideas from your best mini-lesson into an essay in which you demonstrate theoretical thinking while discussing a literary work; or (c.) develop a new argument or analysis involving a critical or theoretical issue with reference to a specific work; (d.) explore theoretically informed criticism (i.e. smart, journal articles) of a text or cultural object, then weigh in on the debate; or (e.) propose an alternative approach. Your final essay should be 10-15 pages (approx. 2500 - 3750 words) and make significant use of two or more scholarly or theoretical articles **Alternative Final Project:** Performance, original poem, website, video, audio podcast . . . If you are interested in exploring the issues of this class through non-academic genres or alternative media, you may choose this option. You must write a paragraph proposal and speak with me before Nov 1st if you are interested in this option. This project option must entail some short (perhaps 4-6 pages) writing in a "straight" academic style, but gives the prepared student the opportunity to stretch.

Recommended Resource

Online through IUP Libraries: Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Criticism

Caution: Many seemingly reliable "theory" resources, from Wikipedia to theory guidebooks of university presses tend to reduce theory to buzzwords, biography, intellectual fashion watching or the "application" of a "lens" to literary works. Be careful that you do not emulate this tendency for this class. Our goal is to think with the theory, not to mass-produce new "interpretations" by applying novel terms like iron-on patches.

Cheating, Plagiarism, and Collusion

Academic Dishonesty is a serious matter. I am savvy and vigilant in detecting students who use unattributed web sources , "collaborate" inappropriately with fellows students, or utilize other "clever" methods to enhance their grades. Take the grade you honestly earn on an assignment. Should a classmate attempt to use your work, refuse; I make no distinction between cheaters and those who aid them. A plagiarized assignment will earn you a zero for the assignment.

Web

Interested and capable students are encouraged to explore and integrate non-print media into their coursework. I recognize that students may bring varied media and technology skills to the class, and do not want to disadvantage those who are new-media "freshman." We will share documents in this course through two web sites.

Moodle - will provide a secure forum for the posting of weekly reading responses. The threaded forum discussion tool allows you to reply to classmates in a way that simulates a face-to-face dialogue.

ENGL676 Wiki (on wikispaces) - will allow groups to share documents such as discussion questions for a given class. We may also share additional notes and handouts through this site.

This should help you submit your assignments and, more importantly, foster a climate of exchange and active engagement as we jointly encounter new literature, theory, and approaches.

I will strive to instruct and assist you as necessary in using these web tools. Please speak with me if you experience difficulties. Of course, if it presents an accessibility issue because of disability for instance, we will together find an accommodating solution.