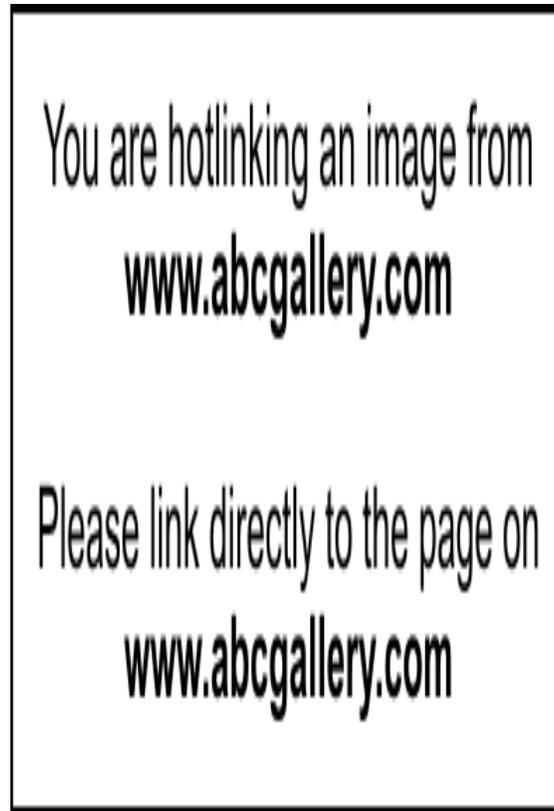


Introduction to Literary Theory
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<http://introttheory-42-429-fall2011.wiki.uml.edu/>



Francisco de Goya, *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*, 1799

What is “literary theory”? This is a question with many answers, none of which is completely conclusive. We might begin by saying that literary theory investigates how literature produces meaning. But this itself poses a complex proposition. Who or what produces meaning? Is it the author or the reader or the work or some combination? More intricately, is it the unconscious or ideology or cultural history or the innate forms of human nature or the material forms of the book that produces the meaning? By the way, what is literature? A novel or poem, most would agree, but any linguistic utterance? Graffiti or advertising? If we think in terms of “text” rather than “literature” then perhaps we can consider a style (goth or preppy) or a tax return? Perhaps even air or skin? What kinds of objects or entities are we talking about here when we talk about “literature” or “texts”? Who or what produces the category of “literature,” or for that matter, “text”? And then the question quickly follows: what about culture? What is culture (different from texts)? Where does culture end and non-culture begin? Can one have nature without culture (the raw without the cooked, as Claude Levi-Strauss put it)? All of these questions get at the big question: how do we understand the nature of meaning itself? What criteria might be used to determine the right (or just valid?) meaning? Do we even need an idea of “right” or “true” meaning?

In response to this dizzying array of questions you might well ask, why should I care? For English majors the answer is pretty straightforward: the discipline of literary studies is interested in how texts have meaning so it is self-evidently a good idea to have some familiarity with the various ways of understanding the questions surrounding the meaning of texts. Indeed, some of what we will read this semester is immediately applicable; in other words, you will be able to transform the theory into method that can then be used to understand texts in other classes. Of course, non-majors may also be interested in such questions, and there are certainly questions here that extend across many fields of the humanities (media studies, art history, film studies, philosophy). Even scientists and engineers might find such a series of issues interesting for they often understand meaning in very different ways than those of us in the humanities. There might be something to be learned through comparison. But for any and all students I think there is an additional value to the course: it takes up a series of enduring questions that have animated thinking for centuries – what constitutes meaning, value, validity?

How to construct an “introduction” to such complex questions? This too is a quandary difficult to solve, but here are some guiding principles that have helped construct the below syllabus. First, I’ve chosen to focus mainly on the twentieth century and really on essays written since the interwar period (between WWI and II) and the present. The exception is that we briefly examine some foundational thinkers – Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Darwin, Arnold – who establish key ideas for almost all the work we read. The time period chosen as our main focus, you might note, is also the time period of the modern English department (English as a field begins to take its modern form – it began to do something other than simply appreciate literature or ferret out the etymologies of words – during the interwar years). In fact, this course might be called “An Introduction to the Theory of English Departments.” That’s not to suggest that this is an insular, navel-gazing endeavor. Understanding the theoretical traditions in English will require that we occasionally return to Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and others, as well as turn to psychology, political science, and even the “harder” sciences. It is also the case, as I will suggest at various points in the course, that the intellectual history we spend most of our time mapping is inseparable from political and social history. “The New Criticism” owes as much to the GI Bill as it does to Kant; Michel Foucault’s “What is an Author” is as much a reflection of the upheavals of 1968 as Foucault’s reading in Nietzsche. However, these worldly reference points recognized, the word “theory” in the course title is not taken as a synonym for “methodology.” In other words, much of the theory here is not necessarily applicable, although some of it is. No one today applies the strict tenets of New Criticism to the reading of a poem. Nevertheless I’ve chosen to discuss New Criticism for the same reasons your early American history class might choose to discuss the Masons (who were extraordinarily influential in the days of the young republic). That said, the course does supply some immediately applicable theoretical perspectives (especially when we turn to the second half to discuss new historicism, cultural studies, race and identity studies, and other more recent critical perspectives).

The course is organized in a roughly chronological fashion. The exception is the very beginning of the course where we read several essays from the 1960s (and link them back to the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger) in order to open up one of the central themes of the course about the location of meaning in literary texts. In the end, simple chronology is an important organizing system of the course, but not the most important. More important is the tripartite structure that we might call: language, psyche, social. The course begins by offering theoretical accounts that place the genesis of the literary’s meaning in a philosophy of language. The middle part of the course examines theories that place that genesis in the psyche’s unconscious, and the third part in the social. Well, at least that’s the general idea: things get messy fast.

One more guiding principles: I don’t assign an incredible number of pages of to read, mainly because these writers ain’t beach reading. They’re tough. Don’t let the low number of pages fool you.

You will also note that I don’t assign an overview text – that is, a narrative of something called “literary theory.” There are a few such books, and they can be helpful, but I like the idea of wrestling with these texts on their own without any grand narrative (other than the one that the syllabus sets up).

20% midterm test

20% final test

20% for each of two writing project
20% for email responses and class participation

Required books:

Almost all readings are in the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. I've ordered the latest edition for the class through the bookstore. But you can probably get by with an earlier edition and save considerable money.

Course Rules and Requirements

1. **Class participation** makes possible a dynamic, collaborative learning community -- the possibility that we as a community produce knowledge. For this reason, class participation is part of your final grade. In order to participate you must, of course, come to class well prepared. Don't just do the reading, but write down questions you have and begin to develop opinions about the reading. Always bring the assigned texts and materials with you to class: every class discussion will involve us in some close analysis of specific passages and images. I will often provide handouts with study questions, and you should come to class having considered those questions in depth. You should also come to each class with at least one marked passage or image and/or one well-considered question or observation to launch discussion. The less assertive need not fear: class participation is not measured by how much you talk; rather, it is the degree of your involvement with and attentiveness in the class, your ability to listen to and respond to your peers, your willingness to share your thoughts in a constructive way.
2. You will write two **formal paper/project** in this course. I will distribute handouts detailing requirements, due dates, and procedures. The assignment is due **AT THE BEGINNING OF CLASS** on the date indicated on the syllabus, and must be typed. Late assignments lose half a letter grade for each class period late. **Only hard copies of written work will be accepted.**
3. **Plagiarism or cheating** of any sort will result in failure of the course. For a discussion of plagiarism see the plagiarism handout.
4. This course has two **tests**. Tests may only be taken late under extraordinary circumstances, and the student must provide a note from a doctor or a dean. In such situations, the request to take the test late must be made at least 24 hours in advance. Failure to follow these rules will result in a zero on the test.
5. **You are required to attend class.** Also, you must have prepared whatever material the assignment requires. An absence will affect your participation grade. And prolonged absences will lead to failure of the course. If you miss class more than three times I will expect you to see me in my office to discuss your future in the course and possible withdrawal. If you miss five classes you will fail the course.
6. If you come to class **excessively or repeatedly late**, it will affect your grade. Also, please refrain from getting up and leaving the room during class unless it's an emergency.
7. You may drink in class, **but you may not eat**. Please silence your phone (vibrate is not silence), and please refrain from messaging during class. If your phone is in any way used in class, I will immediately confiscate it and call my close friend who runs a gambling ring in Turkmenistan.

8. Your **final grade** is comprised of your grades on the papers/projects (each 20% of total), your grade on the two tests (20% each of total), and your grade on daily quizzes, class participation, and the presentation (together 20% of total).
9. In the event of a **class cancellation** because of snow or my absence, please stay current with the syllabus.
10. Please feel free to drop by my office hours to discuss the class or the reading/writing assignments. Of course, I will be happy to make appointments at other times if my office hours conflict with your schedule. **You can best reach me by email.**
11. You are responsible for checking your **UNIVERSITY email account.**

In accordance with University policy and the ADA, I will provide accommodation for students with documented disabilities. If you have a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services: McGauvran 363 (978-934-4338) as soon as possible. They will contact me regarding effective accommodations. In order to speed up this process, you can also let me know in person or via email. This documentation is confidential.

Syllabus

Text marked with an * are not in the *Norton* but on our website.

Week (1) of Sept. 5

- W: Introduction to course;
 Quotations from handout (also in the *Norton Anthology*):
 On skepticism and truth: Nietzsche, from "On Truth and Lying"
 Marx, from *Das Kapital*, from "The Fetishism of
 Commodities"
 Freud, from "The Uncanny"
 Arnold, from *Culture and Anarchy*, on "Sweetness
 and Light"
 Darwin, from *Origins of Species*

Week (2) of Sept. 12

I. Some ways of thinking about the genesis of literary meaning: author, reader, culture, work?

- M: Authors:
 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author"
 Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?"
 With handouts from Heidegger and E. D. Hirsch

- W: Readers:
 Wolfgang Iser, "Interaction between Text and Reader"

Week (3) of Sept. 19

- M: Culture: Interpretive Communities:

Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the *Variorum*"

- W: Work: New Criticism:
William K Wimsatt Jr, and Monroe C. Beardsly, "The Intentional Fallacy"
With handouts from Kant and others

Week (4) of Sept. 26

- M: New Criticism, cont.:
*I. A. Richards, and Monroe Beardsley, from "Principles of Literary Criticism"
*William Empson, from *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.
*Cleanth Brooks, from "Irony as a Principle of Structure"
- W: Structuralism:
*Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth."

II. Logo-genesis

Week (5) of Oct. 3

- M: Structuralism, cont.:
Ferdinand de Saussure, from *Course in General Linguistics*
- W: Deconstruction:
*Jacques Derrida, "Différance"

Week (6) of Oct. 10

- M: NO CLASS: COLUMBUS DAY
- W: Midterm

Week (7) of Oct. 17

III. Psycho-genesis

- M: The unconscious:
Sigmund Freud, from *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "The Dream-Work"
- W: Post-Freud
Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious"

Week (8) of Oct. 24

- M: An example of Freudian/Lacanian criticism:
*Peter Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot"
- W: Another example of Freudian criticism:
Harold Bloom, from *The Anxiety of Influence*, "Introduction: A Meditation upon Priority"
With passages from T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

Week (9) of Oct. 31

- M: An example of Lacanian criticism:

Slavoj Zizek, "Courtly Love" (in second edition but I'll provide a copy in case you have only the first)

IV. Socio-genesis

W: FIRST PAPER DUE

Week (10) of Nov. 7

M: Marx-inspired theory, version #1
Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

W: Marx-inspired theory, version #2
Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry"

Week (11) of Nov. 14

M: Marx-inspired criticism, version #3
Fredric Jameson, from "Introduction" to *The Political Unconscious*

W: New Historicism and Foucault
*Stephen Greenblatt, "The Power of Forms"
Foucault, from *Discipline and Punish*

Week (12) of Nov. 21

M: Feminist Literary Criticism #1
Virginia Woolf, from *A Room of One's Own*

W: Feminist Literary Criticism #2
Annette Kolodny, "Dancing through the Minefield"

Week (13) of Nov. 28

M: African American
*Henry Louis Gates, "Writing, 'Race,' and the Difference it Makes"
*Toni Morrison, from *Playing in the Dark*

W: Post-colonial
Edward Said, from the introduction to *Orientalism*
*Homi Bhabha, from "Signs Taken for Wonders"

Week (14) of Dec. 5

M: SECOND PAPER DUE

W: Gender Theory
Foucault from *The History of Sexuality*
*Judith Butler, from "Imitation and Gender Insubordination."

Week (15) of Dec. 12

M: LAST DAY OF CLASS

Cultural Studies
Dick Hebdige, from *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*

Exam during exam period.