

Literary Theory and Criticism

ENGL 4533 / X20

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This course will introduce upper-level students to the most significant approaches to literary and cultural theory of the past century and to canonical theorists and theoretical texts. I have given preference to theories that best lend themselves to practical application, and students will write papers applying different theoretical lenses to literature. We will also read examples of how the theorists themselves and other scholars have applied the different theories to texts, and we will discuss various ways to apply the theories. Students will read descriptions of the theories and examples of their application in a contemporary textbook, as well as selected primary texts. We will contextualize the theories historically, examine them critically, and discuss how they respond to one another. Students will thus not only learn about theory and its historical development, but also come to terms with difficult essays and ideas, master important theoretical terms, and develop critical thinking skills. The assignments are designed to hone students' communication skills as well. Students should realize that the texts we will be reading are difficult, and not expect to understand everything or feel that they do not have the necessary background or capabilities. We will work through the texts together through discussions, and students should feel empowered when they realize that they are indeed able to apply theoretical principles to literature.

Students will write six essays in this class. The first will be a short New Critical close reading of a poem chosen from among several suggestions; the next four will be medium-length essays applying different theoretical approaches to the short story "The Virgins"; and the last will be a longer essay applying a theoretical approach of each student's choice to a text of that student's choice. "The Virgins" is available under "Start Here!" on D2L, and you should read it at your convenience before we get to Narratology and Structuralism. Do not look up the name of the author. The theories we will be applying to this story are text-centered and emphasize that neither the author nor the context of a text is important.

Note: The starred texts are on D2L, not in the anthology.

Russian Formalism

Jan. 12 Course Introduction

15 Shklovsky, "Art as Technique"; Eichenbaum, "The Formal Method"; Rivkin and Ryan, 3-6

19 Observation of Martin Luther King Day: No Assignments Due

22 Eichenbaum, "How 'The Overcoat' Is Made" (II-III)*; Chizhevsky, "About Gogol's 'Overcoat'" (I-V)*

Literary Text: Gogol's "The Overcoat"*

New Criticism and Close Reading

26 Parker, 11-42; The Harvard Writing Center, "How To Do a Close Reading"*

Linguistics, Narratology, and Structuralism

29 Saussure, From *A Course in General Linguistics*; Lodge, "The Semiotics of Gogol's *Dead Souls*"*; Parker, 43-51

Feb. 2 Tomashevsky, "Thematics"*

Literary Text: Poe's "The Oval Portrait"*

First Paper Due (New Critical Close Reading)

5 Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language" and "Grammar of Poetry and Poetry of Grammar"*; Parker, 67-85

9 Todorov, "Poetics,"* "Grammar of Narrative,"* and "Secret of Narrative"*

12 Propp, From *Morphology of the Folktale*; Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth"*; Parker, 52-67

16 Lotman, "Text and System,"* "On the Specific Character of the Artistic World,"* "F. I. Tiutchev,"* and "A. A. Blok"*; Lodge, "Application of Theoretical Principles to a Poem by Velimir Khlebnikov"*

19 Genette, "Structuralism and Literary Criticism"*; Barthes, From *Mythologies* and "The Struggle with the Angel"*

23, 26 Barthes, *S/Z*

Literary Text: Balzac's "S/Z," in the back of the book (read first)

Reader Response Theories

Mar. 2 Fish, "Interpretive Communities"; Frow, "Text and System"; Iser, "Interaction between Text and Reader"*; Gibson, "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers"*; Parker, 354-76

5 Eco, "Overinterpreting Texts" and "Between Author and Text"; Culler, "In Defence of Overinterpretation" (both in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*)

Second Paper Due (Structuralism, Linguistics, Narratology)

Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism

9 Bakhtin, From *Discourse in the Novel, Rabelais and His World* (Part VII of the anthology) and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics**

12 Johnson, "The Critical Difference: Barthes/Balzac"* and "Writing"; Barthes, "The Death of the Author,"* "From Work to Text,"* and From *The Pleasure of the Text**

16 Derrida, "Differance" and "Mallarmé"*; Parker, 87-100

19 Derrida, "The Exorbitant: Question of Method"*; Johnson, From *Melville's Fist: The Execution of Billy Budd**; Parker, 100-12

23 Lyotard, From *The Postmodern Condition*; Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations"

Psychoanalysis and Psychology

26 Freud, From *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "On Narcissism," "The Uncanny" (I-II); Parker, 114-40

30 Freud, From *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego"; "The Theme of the Three Caskets"*; Brooks, "Narrative Desire"*

Third Paper Due (Reader Response Theory, Bakhtin, Post-Structuralism, Postmodernism)

Apr. 2 Easter Break: No Assignments

6 Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I"; Van der Kolk and McFarlane, "The Black Hole of Trauma"; Parker, 140-49

Feminism

9 Irigay, "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine"; Gilbert and Gubar, From *The Madwoman in the Attic*; Parker, 151-88

13 Bordo, "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity"*; Žižek, "Courtly Love, or, Woman as a Thing"*; bell hooks, "Sexism in Spike Lee"*

Fourth Paper Due (Psychoanalysis, Psychology)

Power Relations, Race and Gender Theory

16 Foucault, From *Discipline and Punish* (Part VI in the anthology); Althusser, From *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus*; Parker, 229-66 and 279-84

20 Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"; McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism'"; Parker, 297-350

Final Paper Proposal Due

23 Fishkin, "Interrogating 'Whiteness'"; Sedgwick, From *Epistemology of the Closet*; Parker, 191-227

Fifth Paper Due (Feminism, Power Relations, Race and Gender Theory)

28 Final Paper Due

Course Requirements:

1. Discussion (15%). I will post discussion question on the readings, videos, and other materials for each due date. You should contribute at least two posts to the discussion, in response either to my questions or your classmates. If you contribute more than two posts, you will receive more credit. Respond to an existing thread using "Reply." If you wish to add your own topic or question, use "Create New Thread." A typical discussion board response, just to give you an idea, should be about 4-8 sentences long. Your participation in the discussions will be graded based on both quality and quantity, as well as on the number of discussion posts you read. You can go back later and read the discussion to make sure you didn't miss anything important. You should post on the discussion board by 10 p.m. on every Tuesday and Friday, starting **Friday, Jan. 15**. Of course, it is best if the discussion gets started earlier so we can respond to one another, so try to post earlier if you can.

2. First Short Paper (10%). A 2-3 page New Critical close reading of a poem is due on **Feb. 2**. You may write up to 4 pages if you feel you need the extra space. I will suggest several poems that I feel lend themselves well to such a reading, but if you wish to choose your own poem, send me a copy or a link to the poem for approval before the deadline.

3. Second through Fifth Papers (15% each). In each of these 3-4 page papers, you will approach "The Virgins" from one of the theoretical standpoints we have covered since the preceding paper (see above for specifics). You may write up to five pages if you feel you need the extra space. The purpose of these assignments is to show you that a single text can yield multiple interpretations; there is no one "correct reading" of any text. You will discover new aspects of the story as you approach it through different theoretical lenses. You should cite any sources you use in MLA style. I have included the bibliographical information for sources posted on D2L so that you may cite them accurately. Consult the MLA website or the Writing Center if you need guidance. I will choose and post an outstanding paper after the assignment, and we can discuss that paper and other approaches you used.

4. Final Paper (15%). You should submit a 5-7 page term paper applying any theoretical approach to a text of your choice by **Apr. 28**. Please email me an informal proposal by **Apr. 20** for approval. For this paper you may use any of the approaches we covered, or you may use approached discussed in the textbook that we did not cover, including New Historicism, environmental criticism and disability studies.

Course Policies:

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty: Plagiarism, cheating, and other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated, including on the daily assignments. If you deliberately plagiarize on any assignments or papers (that is, copying or cutting and pasting), or engage in any other form of academic dishonesty as defined by the MSU Student Handbook, you will get an F in the course and disciplinary proceedings will be initiated.

Safe Zone Statement: This class is a “safe zone” in which all students will be treated and will treat one another equally, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, political beliefs, age, or ability. Diversity of thought is encouraged.

Required Texts (available at the College Bookstore or Amazon, and on reserve at the library):

Barthes, Roland. *S/Z: An Essay*. Tr. Richard Miller. Hill and Wang, 1975.

Eco, Umberto. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler and Christine Brooke-Rose. Ed. Stefan Collini. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

Parker, Robert Dale. *How To Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies*. 4th ed. Oxford UP, 2020.

Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan, ed. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 2nd ed. Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Additional required readings will be posted on D2L.

Additional Assistance:

Office Hours: I will be monitoring my email closely every day from 2-3 and will respond to you immediately. We can chat by email, or, if you wish, we can set up a Zoom meeting or phone call. In general, I will check email regularly and respond to you as soon as possible. You may always request a Zoom meeting or phone call. Communication is extremely important, especially in an online class. Please contact me if you have any questions whatsoever, or if you just want to discuss the material further.

D2L Problems: If you are having trouble submitting an assignment, or if you are having any other technical issues, please email me and let me know. It may be a glitch in D2L that I can easily fix, and I can inform other students of the problem as well as assisting you. You may also go to the D2L homepage and click on “Report a Problem.” Fill out the form and submit it. An alternative is to send an email to D2Lhelp@msutexas.edu describing your problem in detail and providing the full course number and title.

Tutoring and Academic Support Programs: TASP provides free drop-in tutoring for MSU students. Located on the first floor of Moffett Library, TASP's Learning Center provides tutoring support in a number of core courses and subject areas. Writing tutors are

available Monday through Thursday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and Sunday 2:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. You don't need an appointment to use these services.

Additional Tutoring: TASP has partnered with Thinkingsstorm, an online tutoring company that provides you with high-quality, 24/7 tutoring support. Located at the top of your D2L course page, select More > Tutoring to book an appointment with a tutor.