



**MIDWESTERN
STATE UNIVERSITY**

A Member of the Texas Tech University System

Literary Theory and Criticism

ENGL 4533

Spring 2025

MW 2-3:20, PY 201

Professor Kirsten Lodge

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Office: 217 Bea Wood Hall, 940-397-4363

Office Hours: MW 1-1:50 and 3:30-4,
TR 11:10-12:10, and by appointment

This course will introduce upper-level students to the most significant approaches to literary and cultural theory and to canonical theorists and theoretical texts. I have given preference to theories that best lend themselves to broad practical application, and students will write papers applying different theoretical lenses to prose and poetry. In the final paper, students will have the freedom to choose both the theory and the text they wish to interpret. We will also read examples of how the theorists themselves and other scholars have applied the different theories to texts, and we will discuss and practice different ways to apply the theories to literature. Students will be expected to grapple with difficult primary texts in their efforts to understand the theory firsthand, rather than mediated through a textbook or other condensed description of theoretical approaches, although we will also be reading a textbook as a secondary source. 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, but also come to terms with difficult essays and ideas, master important theoretical terms, and develop critical thinking skills. The assignments are designed to improve students' speaking and writing 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, presentations, and class activities, and students should feel empowered when they realize that they are indeed able to apply theoretical principles to literature.

Course Goals

- Study and grapple with difficult theoretical texts and concepts
- Apply theories to literary texts, including both poetry and prose, in essays
- Gain an understanding of how the theories build on one another and respond to one another historically
- Gain skills in presenting and discussing difficult theoretical texts

- Gain skills in presenting and discussing original ideas on how to apply theory to literary texts
- Use sources ethically and in contextually appropriate ways and follow a designated style guide (MLA)
- Demonstrate proficient use of Standard Written English

Required Books

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 4th ed. Manchester UP, 2017.

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.

Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan, ed. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 3rd ed. Blackwell Publishing, 2017.

Additional required readings have been posted on D2L. These readings are marked with an asterisk in the syllabus.

Course Requirements

1. Participation (10%). You will get the most out of class and improve the verbal formulation of your thoughts if you participate in the discussions and class activities, especially since the texts we will be reading are **difficult**. Please bring the readings to class. I encourage you to speak with all of your classmates and respond to one another's ideas during discussion, rather than addressing your thoughts only to me.

2. First Short Paper (10%). You will do a close reading of one on the poems posted on D2L. Your essay must be double-spaced and have a title. It should be 2-3 pages long, not counting the heading or the poem if you quote it in full. You may write up to 4 pages if you feel you need the extra space. All papers for this course should be submitted both through Dropbox and in hard copy in class, except for the final paper, which may be submitted through Dropbox only.

3. Second through Fifth Short Papers (12.5% each). In each 3-4 page paper, you will approach "The Virgins" from any one of the theoretical standpoints we have covered since the preceding paper (see the course schedule 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 theoretical writings and other sources you use in MLA style. I have included the bibliographical information for sources posted on D2L so that you may cite them accurately. You should provide

page numbers for quotations from the story, but there is no need to provide bibliographical information for it. Consult the MLA website or a writing tutor if you need guidance.

Note: Alternatively, the second paper may be on one of the poems posted on D2L.

4. Paper Presentation (5%). At the beginning of the semester you will sign up to present one of your papers to the class on the day it is due. You should make an outline of your paper, including your thesis and all supporting details, and summarize your argument in about 5 minutes. Students may then ask you questions. Given the number of students in the class, we will have several short presentations on the due date of each paper. Please submit your outline to me on the day of your presentation. Paper discussions should stay focused on the papers presented, because I would like to minimize general discussion so that subsequent papers will be as original as possible.

5. Theory Presentation (10%). At the beginning of the semester you will sign up to present on the primary readings for the day. You may also include further information about the theories or theorists. Your presentation should be at least 10-15 minutes long and may be longer. You should begin your presentation with what you understood from the text(s), then raise questions for discussion. Some texts are particularly difficult. You are not expected to fully understand them; just tell us what you got out of the reading. You may change the date of your presentation within the first two weeks of the semester. If you do not present when you are signed up to present, you will get a zero for the assignment unless you have a documented excused absence. You may do background research on the subject of your presentation if you wish.

6. Final Paper (15%). You will submit a 5-7 page term paper applying any theoretical approach to a text of your choice by **May 14**. Please send it to me by email. Please email or see me with a short, informal proposal by **April 30**.

7. Attendance. You must attend class to help you understand the material. You are permitted two unexcused absences. Absences will be excused on the basis of a note from a doctor, dean, military official, or coach. If you believe that your absence should be excused but you do not have a note, you must see me in person and explain your absence. I will then tell you whether your absence is excused. Having to work does not constitute an excused absence. Communication is essential: if you do not explain your absence to me immediately before or after, it will not be excused. Your final grade will be lowered by one point for each unexcused absence in excess of the two permitted unexcused absences.

Three “lates” will add up to one unexcused absence, unless you have given me a valid excuse for lateness. Any student who has five absences for any reason may be dropped from the class after a warning.

Course Policies

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty: Plagiarism, cheating, and other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. If you plagiarize on any assignments or papers, or engage in any other form of academic dishonesty as defined by the MSU Student Handbook, you will get a zero

on the assignment. Other forms of academic dishonesty include, for instance, forging doctor's notes, and lying to the professor.

AI Use: I understand that AI can be a useful tool, and I am not against AI as such; however, the goal of the assignments in this course is to teach you critical thinking and writing skills, and therefore the use of AI in writing papers for this course will be considered plagiarism. This includes Grammarly and similar programs.

Note that there is no uniform policy on AI use at MSU. Make sure that you understand the policy for each course you are taking.

Cellphones: You may not use your cellphone in class except to consult the texts we are discussing, or to google a question we cannot answer.

Food: In accordance with the building policy, you may bring only bottled water to class.

Computers: You may not use a computer in class except to consult the text, or for another justifiable reason. If this is the case, please inform me beforehand.

Attention: Please be alert and do not lay your head down on your desk during class, or I may mark you late or absent without warning.

Class Dismissal: Please do not start to pack up your things or leave until I have dismissed the class. If you believe I have gone over the allotted time, please raise your hand and let me know.

Email Communication: The only way I can communicate with you outside of class is through D2L email. You should set up D2L so that D2L emails are delivered to your email account. You are responsible for checking your email or D2L daily for any reminders, clarifications, or other communications from me.

Safe Zone Statement: This classroom 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.

Other Important Information

"The Virgins": At the beginning of the semester, I will post the story "The Virgins" on D2L. Throughout the semester, in each of your papers, you will apply different theories to the interpretation of this story. You will not be given the author's name. It is important that you should not know who wrote the story or when it was written for two reasons. First, this will enable you to concentrate entirely on the text. Most of the theories we cover do not require any background knowledge of the story or the author, and I want you to focus exclusively on the theory and its application to the text. Second, I do not want you to consult any secondary sources on the story. Each of your papers should be entirely original. This is why we will not discuss the story in class, except for paper presentations, and during the presentations we will not be sidetracked from

discussion of how students applied the theory to the text. Please do not try to Google the text or otherwise attempt to find out who the author is, as that would defeat the main purpose of the course.

Office Hours: My office hours are given above, and I am always happy to help you with any questions you may have, or you may just come by to talk. If you can't make my office hours, we can make an appointment.

Academic Accommodations: If you require special accommodations, please contact Disability Support Service, 168 Clark Student Center, 397-4140, at the beginning of the semester so that appropriate arrangements can be made.

TASP's Learning Center (TLC): Located on the first floor of Moffett Library, TASP's Learning Center offers drop-in tutoring support. Students check in to work one-on-one with a tutor typically for an hour regarding specific concepts. To check the availability of tutors in a specific subject area, navigate to: <https://msutexas.edu/academics/tasp/on-campus.php>.

Student Handbook: For additional information, see [Student Handbook](#) .

Course Schedule

Introduction, Rhetoric, and Close Reading

Jan. 22 *ClassicsWrites at Harvard University, [Close Reading](#); Barry, 1-10 and 19-23; *Gorman, [“The Hill We Climb”](#)

Russian Formalism and New Criticism

27 Rivkin and Ryan, “Formalisms”; Shklovsky, “Art as Technique”; *Eichenbaum, [“The Theory of the Formal Method”](#); **“The Virgins”* (read by Feb. 19 at the latest)

29 *Eichenbaum, “How ‘The Overcoat’ Is Made” (II-III); *Chizhevsky, “About Gogol’s ‘Overcoat’” (I-V); Barry, 33-39 and 342-45

Feb. 3 Brooks, “The Formalist Critics” and “Keats’ Sylvan Historian: History Without the Footnotes,” Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” *Student Paper, “Motion and Emotion: A Close Reading of *The Aeneid* 6.402-6.416”

Linguistics, Prosody, Structuralism, and Narratology

5 Bergman, [“Meter”](#); poetry on D2L; Barry, 205-22 on stylistics

10 Culler, "The Linguistic Foundation," Saussure, "Course in General Linguistics"; Barry, 40-46

12 Foucault, "What Is an Author?"; Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel"; *Lodge, "The Semiotics of Gogol's *Dead Souls*"

First Paper Due: Close Reading

17 Yang, "[Deep Dive: Joseph Campbell's 'Hero's Journey'](#)"; Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth"; Barthes, "Mythologies"; Barry, 46-60

19 Herman, "Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of a Postclassical Narratology"; Newman, "From Beats to Arcs: Towards a Poetics of Television Narrative"; Barthes, "The Struggle with the Angel"; Lodge, "'Bird and Bust and Door': The Sound Structure of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Raven'"; Barry 223-47

24, 26 *Barthes, *S/Z* (read the story in the appendix first)

Reader Response

Mar. 3 Eco, "Overinterpreting Texts" and "Between Author and Text"; Culler, "In Defence of Overinterpretation" (both in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*)

5 McCormick, "Teaching, Studying, and Theorizing the Production and Reception of Literary Texts"

Second Paper Due: Structuralism or Narratology

10-14 No Class: Spring Break

17 Nussbaum, "Cultivating Humanity: the Narrative Imagination"; Keane, "Narrative Empathy" (in Part 8)

Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism

19 Barthes, "The Death of the Author," "From Work to Text," and *From *The Pleasure of the Text*; *Johnson, "The Critical Difference: Barthes/Balzac"; Barry, 61-82

24 Derrida, "Différance" and "That Dangerous Supplement"

Guest Lecturer: Dr. Tyler Williams

26 *Derrida, "Mallarmé"; *Johnson, From *Melville's Fist: The Execution of Billy Budd*

Psychoanalysis and Psychology

31 Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," "The Uncanny," "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego"; Barry, 97-110

Third Paper Due: Post-Structuralism or Reader Response

April 2 Freud, "The Theme of the Three Caskets"; *Brooks, "Narrative Desire"; Carrington, "The Uncontrollable: The Underground Stream" (677-84); Barry, 110-22

Power Relations, Historicisms, and Cultural Materialism

7 Marx, "The German Ideology,"; Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" Barry, 159-74

9 Foucault, "Right of Death and Power over Life"; Barry, 175-93

Feminism and Queer Theory

14 Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience"; Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"; Barry, 123-40

16 Sedgwick, "Epistemology of the Closet"; Hird, "Naturally Queer," "Muñuz, "Cruising Utopia: 'Introduction' and 'Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism'; Barry, 141-58

Fourth Paper Due: Psychoanalysis, Psychology, or Power Relations

17-20 Easter Break

Postcolonialism and Ethnic Studies

21 Said, "Orientalism"; Lodge, "Polyphemus and Postcolonialism: The Island of the Cyclopes in *The Odyssey*"; Barry, 194-204

23 Morrison, "Playing in the Dark"; Kincaid, "A Small Place"; *bell hooks, "Male Heroes and Female Sex Objects"; Barry, 304-22

New Directions

28 Hagan, "Literary Brains: Neuroscience, Criticism, and Theory"; Underwood, "Digital Humanities: Theorizing Research Practices"; Barry, 322-41

Fifth Paper Due: Feminism, Queer Theory, or Postcolonialism

30 Marland, "Ecocriticism"; Giles, "Of Coyotes and Werewolves: Bret Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero*"; Chow, "[Snaking Into the Gothic: Serpentine Sensuousness in Lewis and Coleridge](#)"; Barry, 248-78

Final Paper Proposal Due

5 May McDonnell, "The Animal Turn, Literary Studies, and the Academy"; Fortuny, "Elizabeth Bishop's 'Pink Dog'"

7 Sievers, "The Aesthetics of Human Disqualification"; *Bradshaw, "'Its Own Concentrated Recompense': The Impact of Critical Disability Studies on Romanticism"

14 Final Paper Due