

Why Read Literature?

English 499 – Spring 2015
R 2-3:30
Office: 2382 Faner
Office hours: T 1-3:30; W 1-4:30

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Course Description

This course examines several answers to its titular question from a variety of positions (humanist, New Critical, political, Marxist, post-structuralist, affective), but also explores whether such a question even makes sense as an explanation for how humans relate to the literary. More specifically, is a reader motivated by self-interest, reason, desire, or purposiveness, or have we mistakenly and unconsciously adopted a functionalist logic in asking such a question? Does trying to answer this question from within the disciplinary confines of literary study even make sense? In addition to intradisciplinary and other academic accounts of the use or value of literature and literary study, we'll read two recent popular books, from literary scholars, about the value of literature. The course goal in this respect is to examine alternative venues for and ways of writing about literature and to ask whether the critical essay remains too tied to a problem-solution architecture to account adequately for the reading of literature.

Assignments

- 1) **Analysis Paper:** One traditional academic analysis paper of approximately eight pages (2400-2800 words), emailed as an MS Word attachment by noon on the due date.
- 2) **Critical Article:** A critical article about literature or a specific piece of literature geared toward an audience of public intellectuals (approximately eight pages; 2400-2800 words). You might think of this piece as a submission to a journal like *n+1* or *Jacobin*, or a more traditional magazine like *Harper's* or *The Atlantic*.

Texts

We're reading all or substantial portions of the following books. Therefore, I suggest purchasing them. I won't put them on reserve so that you'll be able to check them out of the library if you prefer.

Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, and Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978).

Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2012).

William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1947).

Marjorie Garber, *The Use and Abuse of Literature* (New York: Pantheon, 2011).

Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford UP, 2012).

Office Business

There is a reason that I have office hours: namely, to talk to students. Please feel free to stop by and discuss any questions that you may have about this course: the instructor likes to talk. If you are unable to make my regular office hours, please speak to me about scheduling a meeting at some other time.

Grading

When calculating your final grade I will use the following formula: analysis paper = 50%, critical article = 50%

What follows is a description of traditional academic paper grades. **For the more popular critical essay in this class, there will be the added criteria of 1) accessibility and 2) the avoidance of popular clichés about the humanities** (I've included a more thorough description of these criteria in the assignment description for this paper). I'm sure you've already seen something of this sort in other seminars, but I reproduce it here just for handy reference. As these descriptions indicate, I read your papers looking primarily for two qualities: *precision* and *critical self-reflection* (or "circumspection," if you prefer):

- A: The paper demonstrates *superior* independent thought and critical self-reflection as well as a thorough grasp of the larger critical stakes of its own theses. It also moves substantially beyond class discussion topics and provides precise, careful, and circumspect explanations of its textual evidence. The paper exhibits a comprehensive grasp of critical arguments, their assumptions, and broader implications and deftly uses said arguments to build its own thesis. An A on the seminar paper also means that I will write you a glowing letter of recommendation and that the paper is a solid first stab at a publishable article.
- A- : The A- paper differs from the A paper in two respects: 1) its independent thought and self-reflection is *compelling*, but not superior and 2) it will garner a solid, but not glowing letter of recommendation. In addition, the A- paper will need substantial reworking of its central claims and/or support and organization in order to be a workable first draft of an article.
- B+ : The paper demonstrates *good* critical self-reflection as well as an awareness of the larger critical stakes of its own theses. It also exhibits a good understanding of the text's meaning and function and provides precise and careful explanations of its textual evidence. The B+ paper differs from the A papers primarily in its level of critical self-reflection, its ability to answer the "so what?" question, and its independence from interpretations we have already outlined in class. In its use of secondary sources, the B+ paper exhibits a good grasp of critical arguments—but not necessarily the assumptions of said arguments—and ties said arguments to its chief claims. The B+ paper is unlikely to garner a solid recommendation letter and does not hold much promise for future publication.
- B: The paper exhibits a *solid* understanding of the text's meaning and critically engages class discussion topics. Its textual evidence is solid and correct, but it does not anticipate and defuse objections or contrary readings of a given passage: i.e., its readings are not adequately circumspect. The B paper differs from the B+ and A papers in that it doesn't exhibit as high a level of critical self-reflection or self-awareness. In its use of secondary sources, the B paper understands the arguments, but does not adapt them adequately to its own thesis. It also misunderstands or ignores the broader implications of said critical arguments.

- C: The paper exhibits understanding of the text's basic features (plot, imagery, thematics, arguments, etc.), but ignores or misunderstands issues raised in class discussion. The C paper also often ignores paper directions by 1) bringing extraneous evaluative systems to bear on the text (moral evaluation is the most common); 2) engaging in unwarranted psychological speculation about character or authorial motivation; 3) confessing mere opinions or responses. In short, the C paper does not exhibit engagement with the material necessary for graduate study.
- D and F: The paper exhibits little to no understanding of the text's basic features and makes factual and reading errors. It also ignores or fundamentally misunderstands topics raised in class discussion and reveals itself to be uninterested in improved understanding. D and F papers indicate that a student should withdraw from graduate study immediately.

Schedule

R, 19 March:

- Jeffrey T. Nealon, Chapters 4, 6, 7, and Coda, *Post-Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford UP, 2012), 66-84, 126-194.
- Geoffrey Gault Harpham, "Why We Need the 16,772nd Book on Shakespeare," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 20 (Fall/Winter 2011): 109-116.

R, 26 March:

- Maurice Blanchot, Chapters 6-7, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 189-247.

T, 31 March (2 p.m.):

- Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 1-156.
- Fredric Jameson, "Towards Dialectical Criticism," in *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971), 306-416.

W, 8 April: **analysis paper draft due: noon**

R, 9 April:

- Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108 (2009): 1-21.
- Stanley Fish, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," in *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 383-427.
- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 123-151.
- Jonathan Culler, "Semiotics as a Theory of Reading" and "Stanley Fish and the Righting of the Reader," in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) 47-79, 119-131.

M, 13 April: **analysis paper due: noon**

R, 16 April:

- William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1947).

R, 23 April:

- Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism,” “The Author as Producer,” “Critique of Violence,” “Theologico-Political Fragment,” “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, and Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978), 177-192, 220-238, 277-300, 312-336.
- Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” “The Storyteller,” “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 69-109, 155-200.

R, 30 April:

- Marjorie Garber, introduction, Chapters 3-6, 8-9, *The Use and Abuse of Literature* (New York: Pantheon, 2011), 3-30, 77-185, 233-283.

R, 7 May: **critical article draft due: noon**

- Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2012).

R, 14 May: **critical article due: noon**