
How to Read and Write about Literature

Description

This course introduces students to the writing practices and concepts necessary to engage in literary analysis and criticism. It does so by focusing on John Donne's poetry, as well as critical arguments about his work. In part, that's a pragmatic decision: you can read a short poem (the object analyzed) and criticism of it (the analysis itself) in a reasonable timeframe and begin to write intelligently about it on the basis of this reading. In part, it's a conceptual and literary historical issue: Donne's verse is pivotal in the development of literary criticism as an academic discipline during the twentieth century. An intensive focus on his poems and critical essays about them has the benefit of providing a loose anatomy of modern literary study.

More broadly, that focus has an added boon: reading poems carefully and intensively is one way to develop the grammatical, syntactic, and prosodic attentiveness necessary to becoming a good writer. One premise of this course is that attending to words themselves in your reading (the form, tone, genre, or style of a statement) improves your facility with words in your writing. In sum, short lyrics ask readers to attend to the *how*, not just the *what* of meaning. That's pivotal for any writer trying to say something interesting interestingly.

This class requires quite a lot of writing from students and some class periods will be devoted to examining individual pieces of student writing, talking specifically about what works and what does not and why. Students will also learn a good bit of linguistic, grammatical, rhetorical, and poetic terminology: yes, that means that you'll actually know what situational irony and amphibology mean by the end of this course. Students will also write quite a few different types of essays: 1) an essay disagreeing with a literary critical claim; 2) an essay disagreeing with a literary critical approach; 3) a formal analysis of a single poem; 4) an essay on Donne's adaptation of a classical genre (that's why we're reading Ovid's *Amores*); 5) an essay on Donne's adaptation by a later poet or writer (that's why we're reading Margaret Edson's *Wit*); 6) an essay using historical documents and sources in support of a claim about Donne's poems (that's why we're reading *Pseudo-Martyr* and some sermons); 7) an essay on the pedagogical utility of a poem. By the end of this course, students will be able to fashion argumentatively sound essays using a variety of critical and conceptual approaches.

Texts

John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A.J. Smith (Penguin, 1977).

Ovid, *The Erotic Poems*, trans. Peter Green (Penguin, 1982).

Margaret Edson, *Wit* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

John Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr* (London: W. Stansby, 1610) [Early English Books Online].

John Donne, selected *Sermons* [<https://lib.byu.edu/collections/john-donne-sermons/>]

selected critical essays

Requirements

Seven papers, two short-answer exams, one oral presentation.