2014

302 512-01 Literary Theory

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ENGL 302 / ENGL 512 Literary Theory  
Spring 2014  
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Office Hours: M 6:00-7:00; W 1:30-2:30

**Texts:**

Handouts, emailed and/or posted on Blackboard.

**Course Description & Goals:**

Theory is what is generated when some aspect of literature, its nature, its history, its place in society, its conditions of production and reception, its meaning in general, or the meanings of particular works, ceases to be a given and becomes a question to argued in a generalized way. Theory is what inevitably arises when literary conventions and critical definitions once taken for granted have become objects of generalized discussion and dispute.  


Nobody will penalize me heavily if I dislike a particular Donne poem, but if I argue that Donne is not literature at all then in certain circumstances I might risk losing my job.  


ENGL 302/512 is a required course for both the undergraduate English major and the English M.A. Although it could be argued that any discussion of a work of literature assumes some underlying theoretical position, literary theory per se, which involves reflection on critical assumptions and methods, gradually emerges with the academic institutionalization of literary studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It comes to wide attention as a distinct “discursive field” only in the late decades of the twentieth century—often accompanied by heated debate and institutional turmoil. At this point, an awareness of specific theoretical positions in the field and of the theoretical orientation of contemporary literary studies in general is mandatory for advanced undergraduate and graduate work in English. Therefore, the goals of this course are:

* This is a PDF of the entire book. If you want a print edition, I recommend that you order it from Amazon. Only part of the book will be required reading; the rest will be recommended reading.
• To familiarize students with the various types or schools of modern literary and cultural criticism.
• To demonstrate the analytic and interpretive methods through which critics approach literary texts and cultural production in general.
• To understand and appreciate the debates which develop as these theoretical movements rise and fall over the course of recent history.
• To reflect on the theoretical implications of various critical methods.
• To develop the skills necessary for writing criticism which employs various theoretical stances, and which demonstrates a self-reflective intelligence and historical awareness.

The very idea of literary theory is, at least potentially, a destabilizing one, for a given theory brings into question previously unexamined conceptions of reading and writing, of the production, dissemination and reception of texts. Indeed, as Gerald Graff observes, theory is what arises when there is no longer a consensus about these matters among those who have the power to define and regulate the institutions of literacy and textuality in a given society. Yet some theories (stated or unstated) are also used to stabilize, domesticate, and institutionalize practices of reading and writing, especially those with oppositional potential. Terry Eagleton’s witty remark above points out that not only literary theory, but literature itself is made to conform to institutional norms and conventions; conversely, particular views of literature and particular literary theories are the means through which institutional conventions are established and maintained. Such being the case, in a course like this, we need to learn about critical theories, but we must also study what these theories tell us about our own places within systems of discourse, institutions of reading and writing, and related social practices.

Much of the work in this course will involve the study of critical essays (or excerpts therefrom) representing one or another theoretical position, as found in Literary Theory: An Anthology. We will also draw on Eagleton’s Literary Theory: An Introduction, which provide an overview of some of the theories. Sometimes we will read pieces dealing directly with literature; sometimes they will be of a more abstract nature. And sometimes we will read primary texts (short stories or poems) from the perspective of one or more theories. With this in mind, when we study these theories, we will try to understand them on their own terms, but we will also inquire into their implications for the academic study of literature. What happens to a reader when he or she views a work of literature through a Marxist, or a feminist, or a psychoanalytic perspective? What happens to English as a discipline? What happens to the understanding of culture and to the worldview of the individual student who devotes himself or herself to the study of literary theory? But just as importantly, we should also ask how one or another theoretical perspective helps us understand and appreciate a particular novel, poem, film, music video, TV series, etc.

One feature of the field, especially in its advanced stages, is the high degree of overlap, synthesis or hybridity among theories. Thus we can speak of Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, deconstruction, reader response criticism, etc. as manifesting themselves variously and to different degrees in the work of a particular theorist. But as Terry Eagleton writes, “not all of these methods are mutually compatible. However generously liberal-minded we aim to be, trying to combine structuralism, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis is more likely to lead to a nervous breakdown than to a brilliant literary career.” Students will do well to keep this in mind!
Policies, Procedures, Assignments, & Grading:

This course is conducted primarily through discussion, though given the difficult and sometimes alien nature of the material to many students, some lecturing will be necessary. This is an upper-level class that meets once a week: students are expected to keep up with the reading and attend class regularly, and should be ready to contribute to discussion with their questions and comments. I hope you will come to regard this class as a community of readers and writers engaged in studying the discourse of literary theory: participation by the entire group is the means through which we can develop a spirit of communal learning. **Remember: if you have a question about a particular text or theoretical issue, chances are that others in class have a similar question. Therefore, asking your question will probably further everyone’s understanding of the work. Don’t be shy!**

**Attendance:** Regular attendance is a requirement of this course. I will permit two unexcused absences per semester. More missed classes will adversely affect your grade. If a problem of any sort arises, *please get in touch with me.* We can usually work it out.

**Email:** Check you Xavier email at least twice between classes for course updates, assignments, additional materials, etc. Feel free to email me with your questions, comments and concerns.

**Papers:** Papers are to be turned in at the start of class on the day they are due. **Papers sent by email will not be accepted.** Papers turned in by noon on the following day to my mailbox in Hinkle Hall will be accepted, graded and returned, *with no comments and no opportunities for rewrites.* **Papers will not be accepted after this time—the grade for the assignment will be an automatic F.** Rewrite policy: I encourage you to rewrite your paper if you receive a grade in the C range or lower. A grade of F requires a rewrite. Please meet with me before you begin rewriting. Turn in your first version along with your rewrite on the due date we agree upon.

**Course work for ENGL 302:** Two papers (40%); take-home mid-term exam (25%); final exam (25%); class participation (10%).

**Course work for ENGL 512:** Take-home mid-term exam (25%); final exam (25%); research paper (25%); class presentation (15%); class participation (10%).

**Calendar**


Feb. 17  Psychoanalysis. Freud, *A Case of Hysteria (Dora).* (Make sure to read the introduction.) **Paper #1 due for 302 students.**

Feb. 24  Deconstruction. R & R 258-261, 278-290, 300-313, 90-96; Bressler, excerpt on deconstruction (Blackboard). **Recommended:** Eagleton 110-130.

March 10  Marxism. R & R 644-646, 653-658, 673, 693-702. **Recommended:** Žižek, R & R 712-724. **Take-home mid-term due.**

March 17  Marxism / Postmodernism. R & R 355-364, 1235-1241; Jameson, “Postmodernism” (Blackboard)

March 24  Postmodernism. Foucault, “What Is an Author?” (Blackboard); poems by Ashbery and Palmer; other cultural artifacts t.b.a. **Recommended:** Baudrillard, R & R 365-377. **Research paper abstract and annotated bibliography due for 512 students.**

March 31  Theorizing Genre: The Novel. R & R 674-685; Trilling, “Manners, Morals and the Novel” (Blackboard); Benjamin, “The Storyteller” (Blackboard).

April 7  Feminism & Gender Studies. R & R 765-769, 812-825, 885-888; 900-921. **Recommended:** Cixous, R & R 348-354.

April 14  Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* **Paper #2 due for 302 students.**

April 21  Theorizing Genre: The Lyric. Adorno, “Lyric Poetry and Society” (Blackboard); Bloom, selections from *The Anxiety of Influence* (Blackboard); R & R 533-548.

April 28  T.B.A. (Catch-up week if needed, review, conclusions, etc.) **Research paper due for 512 students.**

May 5  **Final Exam.**