

English 480: Introduction to Literary Theory

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Goals:

- To think together about the central questions of literary theory and criticism.
- To become familiar with the history of literary theory and some of its most important authors, movements, and ideas.
- To become more adept at the practices central to the discipline, i.e. its ways of reading, writing, and talking.
- To come to some judgments about the value of various approaches to literature and about which ones you are interested in pursuing further and why.
- To sharpen your own sense of the value of literature and literary study and be able to articulate it better.

These are broad goals. In assembling the course I have already made some choices about how to focus them: which questions to emphasize, which texts to read and in what order, which practices to ask of you. As we go I want the course to be shaped as much as possible by your interests as well, and perhaps the best way to invite your participation in that shaping is to say a little bit more about my own interests.

I'm interested in asking the most basic questions about literary study and seeing how various people and traditions have answered them. What is literature? Why do, or why should, we read it? What is it good for? How do, and how should, we read it? What makes it good? How is it true? How does its beauty matter? How does it relate to other concerns of life? How does literary knowledge relate to other kinds of knowledge? Another running question will be how, and to what extent, literary studies is a discipline unto itself, with literary theory as its methodology and literary criticism as its central practice.

In choosing the readings, I am trying to strike several balances. The first is a question of quantity: What will give some kind of adequate introduction to the field without overloading our ability to give the readings good attention? Let's see how this goes. The readings may not look long, but the primary texts are tough. Then there is a balance between what has been important to the history of the discipline and what remains most valuable or influential or talked-about now. Another is between what is most explicitly and rigorously theoretical and what is more practical and worked out in application to reading texts. And then there is the balance between what is seen as important by the mainstream of the discipline and what is seen as important by, for example, theologically oriented Christians such as your instructor—hence some of the supplements to our textbooks.

Requirements:

Unlike the sciences, and even some of the other disciplines of the humanities, literary studies have not had a clear, agreed upon understanding of what practices distinguish it from what any good

reader of literature does without special training. As a place to start, however, I would like to suggest two practices that seem central to the theory and practice of literary studies: (1) reflection about how and why we read and (2) choosing to read through given interpretive lenses. To some extent, the course will be conducted as a workshop on these practices at the same time that it is a seminar on the readings we do together.

Attendance and participation. Of course I expect your attendance and participation in class. The quality of your oral participation in class will count for a fifth of your final grade according to the following standards:

A: Regular, helpful questions and comments in class; fully engaged

B: Frequent, pertinent comments; good questions and listening

C: Occasional comments in class; attentiveness questionable; poor questions

D: Rare interaction in class; disengaged from discussion; questions lacking

In preparation for class each day, if you are not writing a mirror or lens paper, **please write on a notecard two questions about the assigned readings.** I hold, following Hans-Georg Gadamer, that asking good questions is the central method of the humanities, and this will force you to practice this essential skill. It will also help seed our discussion.

Even if you've only been able to peek at the reading for a given day (we all have days like that), please come to class and participate. It may even be that the most helpful questions and perspectives on a given day come from someone who is farther outside the text at hand. One absence will be allowed without excuse. After that, each absence will drop your grade for participation by a partial step unless we talk about it.

Mirror papers. At the beginning and end of the course I'll ask you to write reflections on your own critical stance and practices to share with the class. See fuller descriptions on the schedule below.

Lens papers. Here I ask you to put on your theory glasses and looking at something through them. Several times during the semester, you will be responsible for bringing to class a short 2-3 page paper that begins to interpret a literary or other text of your choice through the theoretical perspective that is the focus of the day's readings. Each day there will be one or two people bringing a paper. I will ask you to read these out loud during class as a way of contributing to our discussion. Anything could be a text for these purposes, i.e. anything made by human or divine artifice (not just works of prose or verse, but pieces of art, dance, movies, buildings, actual events or reports of them, etc.), but I hope that most often these will be literary works, or at least imaginative ones. It would be especially interesting, I think, if we return repeatedly to some of the same texts from different angles. You could use the same text for more than one of your papers, or pick up on the same text someone else used.

Please bring copies of your lens papers for everyone in the class in order to make it easier for them to follow along and interact with after you read it out.

After the class discusses your paper, you may have until the next class period to revise it before submitting it for a grade.

Feel free to be adventurous and playful with lens papers. They are all about playing around with what you find in the readings. Lens papers can also be a place to explore topics for your longer critical essay. If you have a text in mind to write about for that essay, you might try using it for these short papers.

Critical essay. Your major piece of writing for the course will be an essay of 15-20 pages applying a theoretical approach (or more than one) to a literary text of your choice. It will be due at the end of the semester, and I will ask for a proposal and annotated bibliography along the way. We will talk about expectations for all of these as they approach. Please feel free to meet with me at any time to talk about possible topics, research strategies, etc. We should meet at least once by mid-semester to talk about directions you are considering.

Grading

I'll total your grade according to the following proportions:

Participation:	20%
Mirror and lens papers:	40%
Proposal and bibliography:	5%
Final essay:	35%

Advice on reading

- Take advantage of the textbook's apparatus, including the glossary, the bibliographies for further reading, and the index, which allows you to quickly cross-reference terms used differently by the various theorists.
- Isolate the principal terms the author uses and locate their definitions—if they are explicitly defined—or try to reconstruct their definitions if only defined through context.
- What is each text's central argument? What questions is it asking? What are the main points? What assumptions does it make, for instance, about the nature of literature and about the critic's task? What kind of literature does this author seem to have primarily in mind? Are all kinds of texts to be interpreted the same way? What seems to be most important to this author?
- Make connections between the texts. What assumptions or arguments do they share? What are the most important differences? How do they fit together in a larger story of the development of literary theory? How do the primary texts illustrate points made in the secondary texts (Parker and Stevens)? What interests you in the primary texts that the secondary texts don't address?
- Mark down questions that occur to you. Note problematic passages you don't understand; speculate on the application of theories to imaginative works; note seeming inconsistencies or apparent self-contradictions within the essays; note discrepancies between the critic's views on literature and your own intuitive ideas. Mark passages in the text that you think need further explication in class.

Advice from previous students (taken from SALT)

"Don't worry if you don't understand it all right away."

"This is an excellent course, and the material will benefit any person studying English or interested in the ways philosophy, history, cultural studies, and literature meld together in the practice of literary criticism. You will do a lot of reading - so allow plenty of time to digest it and question it. Don't do it right before class, or it will be hard to discuss meaningfully. Also, choose a work for your final paper early on and be gathering resources, and applying theories to it as you go."

More help

I encourage you to take advantage the help offered at the Klooster Center. One of the Writing Assistants working there this semester, Duffy Lampen, was in this course last year and would be in a good position to help you with lens papers and your final paper at any stage from brainstorming to revision.

Assessment

Hope College regularly asks all students to assess their courses in the interest of improving teaching and learning. At the end of the semester, I will ask you to assess how well this course has met its goals. Your responses will be anonymous. I will take the collective results seriously in my efforts to improve this course. I really do find this kind of feedback helpful and ask that you give it your best attention.

Students with Disabilities

Any student whose disability falls within the guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act should inform the instructor at the beginning of the semester of any special accommodations or equipment needs necessary to complete the requirements for this course. Students must register documentation with the Office of Disability Services and/or Academic Support Center. If you have questions, call Student Development at extension 7800.

Academic Honesty

All work turned in for this course should represent the work of the person whose name appears on it. Representing another's work as your own is not only dishonest, it also defeats your learning. Please do learn from others by discussing texts and assignments with them both inside and outside of class. I am happy to discuss assignments with you while you are working on them. And you are welcome to learn from any other sources. In the end, however, all papers and exams must be done by you alone.

Unacknowledged use of another's words or ideas is plagiarism. Any quotation or direct copying from another's work must be set off from your text either by quotation marks or by indentation, and it must be given an adequate citation (this includes quotations from our required texts as well as any other sources you use). Paraphrases must also be given an adequate citation. If you are uncertain about how to avoid plagiarism or how to give adequate citations, consult *A Writer's Reference*, and if you have any questions, talk with me. Cases of academic dishonesty will be handled using the procedures outlined in the *Hope College Catalog*. The penalty is failure, either of the assignment or of the entire course, depending on the instructor's judgment of the seriousness of the case. For more on plagiarism—what it is, why it matters, the penalties, how to avoid it, and what others on campus think about it—see Van Wylen library's page on it at <http://www.hope.edu/lib/plagiarism/index.html>.

Texts

The following texts are available at the college bookstore:

Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Kenny, Oxford World's Classics, 2013, ISBN 9780199608362.

Robert Dale Parker, *How to Interpret Literature*, 3rd ed., Oxford UP, 2015, ISBN 9780199331161.

Robert Dale Parker, *Critical Theory: A Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies*, Oxford UP, 2012, ISBN 9780199797776 (abbreviated CT on the schedule).

Anne H. Stevens, *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Introduction*, Broadview Press, 2015, ISBN 978-1554812370

Tentative Schedule

T 8/30: Introduction.

R 9/1: Parker, introduction (1-10); Stevens, introduction and on Plato (13-54); Plato, excerpts from *Republic* in Kenny's translation of Aristotle (3-14) and the allegory of the cave from book VII (available at <http://webpace.ship.edu/cgboer/platoscave.html>). Write and bring to class a reflection of a couple pages on your study of English literature thus far in your life. What made you decide to study English, what have you hoped to get from it, and in what ways have those hopes been realized? What kinds of works has your curriculum tended to include, and what exclusions have you been aware of? What do you most value about reading literature? In what ways have you tended to approach your study of literature, if you're conscious of any particular approach? In response to Plato, consider the part that literature has played in your overall education.

T 9/6: Aristotle and classical rhetoric and criticism: Stevens 54-67; Kenny's introduction to Aristotle's *Poetics* (pp. vii-xxxviii), the text itself (11-55), and Dorothy Sayers's lecture on Aristotle on detective fiction (81-88).

R 9/8: The Middle Ages and early Modernity: Stevens 68-89; Hugh of St. Victor preface, 1.1, 2.1, 2.27-29, 3.3-19, 5.1-3, 5.6-7, 6.1-5, 6.8-12 (handout or online, with notes, at <http://archive.org/details/didascaliconmedi00hugh>); excerpt from Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry" (in Kenny's translation of Aristotle, 59-71).

T 9/13: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century: Stevens 91-134; Coleridge, excerpts from "Biographia Literaria" (handout); excerpt from Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry" (in Kenny's translation of Aristotle, 75-7); Tolkien, excerpts from "On Fairy-stories" (handout).

R 9/15: New Criticism: Parker 11-42; Stevens 135-37, 142-48; Brooks, "The Language of Paradox" (CT 7-19); Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (http://essays.quotidiana.org/eliot/tradition_and_the_individual/).

T 9/20: Structuralism and Russian Formalism: Parker 43-65; Stevens 137-42, 149-51; Saussure, from *Course in General Linguistics* (CT 37-48); Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" (CT 48-58); Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (CT 83-87).

R 9/22: Narratology: Parker 65-83; Propp (CT 58-62); Jakobson (CT 62-73).

T 9/27: Mimetic Theory: <http://www.imitatio.org/brief-intro/>; intro by Doran; Girard, "Triangular Desire," "Conversion in Literature and Christianity" (handouts).

R 9/29: Mimetic Theory: Girard, "The Myth of Oedipus, the Truth of Joseph," "Hamlet's Dull Revenge" (handouts); <http://inference-review.com/article/desire-violence-and-religion>.

[F 9/30, 1-4pm: Arts & Humanities Symposium, "Am I Not Human?" Cook Auditorium/DePree Gallery]

T 10/4: Deconstruction: Parker 85-101; Stevens 154-58; Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie..." (CT 89-96); Derrida, "The End of the Book..." (CT 96-114).

R 10/6: Psychoanalysis: Parker 111-46; Stevens 211-22; Freud (CT 181-94); Lacan (194-203, just a sample; you might also want to read Poe's story "The Purloined Letter," available online).

T 10/11: Fall recess.

R 10/13: Marxism: Parker 220-30; Stevens 180-89; Benjamin (CT 395-414); Bakhtin, excerpts (handout).

T 10/18: Post-structuralist Marxism: Parker 230-56 (with Chopin, "The Story of an Hour," <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/webtexts/hour/>); Stevens 190-95; Althusser, "Ideology..." (CT 449-61); Williams, "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent" (CT 461-66).

R 10/20: Feminism: Dorothy Parker, "A Telephone Call" (<http://www.classicshorts.com/stories/teleycal.html>); Parker 148-69; Stevens 203-6; Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (CT 242-57); Moi "Images of Women' Criticism" (CT 263-69).

T 10/25: Feminism: Parker 169-83; Mulvey (CT 231-41); hooks (CT 269-82).

R 10/27: Queer Studies: Parker 185-217; Rich (CT 283-313); Sedgwick (CT 321-26).

T 11/1: Queer Studies: Butler, Nussbaum (CT 327-53). **Annotated bibliography due.** Please write a page describing your research topic: What text(s) will you be interpreting? What lens(es) will you use? What question(s) do you want to answer? What questions do you have about sources and methodology? Then give full bibliographic entries for six secondary sources (i.e. not the text you are interpreting or texts assigned for our course) and a sentence or two about how they each look like they will be useful.

R 11/3: Postcolonial Studies: Stevens 194-99; Parker 285-311; Fanon (CT 627-45); Said (CT 718-34).

T 11/8: Race Studies: Parker 311-27; Anzaldúa (CT 734-40); Gates (CT 740-48).

R 11/10: Reader Response Theory: Parker 330-51; Stevens 223-30; Fish (CT 819-29); Lewis, excerpts from *An Experiment in Criticism* (handout).

T 11/15: New Historicism: Stevens 160-74; Parker 259-74; Foucault (CT 493-507); Greenblatt (CT 553-68).

R 11/17: Cultural Studies: Parker 274-83; Stevens 174-79; Hall (CT 543-53); Rose (CT 582-88).

T 11/22: Ecocriticism: Parker 354-67; Buell (CT 588-608); Berry, "It All Turns on Affection" (the 2012 NEH Jefferson Lecture, <http://www.neh.gov/about/awards/jefferson-lecture/wendell-e-berry-lecture>).

R 11/24: Thanksgiving recess.

T 11/29: Disability Studies: Parker 367-79; McRuer (CT 353-63); Siebers, handout from *Disability Theory*.

R 12/1: Open day: reading to be decided.

T 12/6: Retrospective: Girard, "Theory and Its Terrors" (handout). Write and bring to class a 2-page retrospective paper that forms some tentative conclusions about what you've learned in the course. How have you answered the questions that you have had about the study of literature? What approaches seem most valuable to you and why? What directions for further exploration are you interested in?

R 12/8: Wrap-up activity: to be announced.

Critical essay due Mon., 12/11, at 11am at my office or the English dept. office (be sure it has my name on it). If you'd like me to send it back, please give me a self-addressed (and large enough) envelope; the college can pay the postage.