Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism

As a course on the theories of literary study, English 303 will introduce you to terminology and techniques you can use to make your own reading experiences productive. But it will also examine the grounds upon which those terms and techniques have been established in the first place. The survey will proceed historically, aiming to recognize the broad continuities as well as the disputes among critics regarding the nature of “literature,” “language,” “interpretation,” and other related concepts whose meaning we often take for granted. In other words, this course is devoted to probing the assumptions and delineating the history behind the most basic practices of literary study, as they have been established by a rich field of discourse stretching from the fifth century BCE to the present.

Course Goals: By the end of the semester, you will

- read a range of major texts by major figures in the history of literary criticism and theory, from Plato to the present day.
- learn some key terms for critical movements, concepts in literary theory, and related areas.
- develop skills needed to understand and analyze difficult critical texts and to respond to the ideas in these texts, placing your own ideas about language, literature, interpretation, and representation in relation to larger debates.
- practice writing about critical texts, making connections among diverse points of view and applying literary theories to primary texts.
- lead a class discussion, formulating opinions about the readings and getting others involved in the conversation.

Required Text (available at bookstore): The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism

Course requirements: Presentation, three take-home exams, and in-class participation. Grading will be weighted as follows: presentation 15%, three exams 25% each, and participation (including attendance) 10%.

Take-home exams: These exams will vary in format but will ask you to produce different types of writing about the readings. You will be asked to demonstrate your understanding of the texts we’ve read, to make connections among readings, and to apply the concepts of various theorists to literary and other types of texts. The emphasis in these exams is on your writing and critical thinking skills rather than on memorization or a single, “correct” interpretation of the texts.
**Presentation instructions:** Presentations should be around five to ten minutes, to begin the day’s discussion of a given theoretical or critical text. You should not present biographical information about the author, a summary of the entire work, or any sort of outside material. Instead, your presentation should focus very narrowly on some aspect of the text. You could pick a passage that you find particularly complex or dense and present a reading of it. You could explicate a single concept, term, or image in the reading that you feel opens up larger questions about the text. Or you could talk about the applications or implications of a specific idea in the reading. After presenting your analysis, you should end with a couple of questions for discussion. You will be graded on the material you present, not your oratorical skills, so relax and have fun.

**Other class policies:**

- **Class attendance is mandatory.** You are allowed three unexcused absences; more than that will result in a reduced grade. If you know you will miss class because of travel, illness, or another reason you must let me know ahead of the class time (via email is fine) for it to count as excused. I will take attendance at the beginning of the class period. If you show up more than ten minutes late for class your attendance may not be counted.
- **Take-home exams will automatically be reduced by a full letter grade if they are turned in late.** I cannot accept late exams after the time that I turn back that exam to the class (usually about three or four classes after the due date).
- **Plagiarism includes any unacknowledged borrowing from a written source, website, or fellow student.** Any student who plagiarizes in a written assignment or in their presentation will automatically fail the course. Particularly egregious cases may be reported to the appropriate authorities (such as the department chair) at the discretion of the instructor.
- **I would request that no electronic devices be used in the classroom.** Please silence your phones and other beeping devices. I would prefer that you not take notes on a computer. This is a seminar-style class where we will be engaged with discussing the ideas of the texts we read rather than memorizing facts about them. It is better for you to listen to and take part in the discussions than to frantically transcribe what others are saying (thus leaving you open to the temptation of checking your email, etc.).
- **Over the course of the semester, there may be extra credit opportunities for attending and writing a short response to university events.**

**Disabilities:** If you have a documented disability that may require assistance, you will need to contact the Disability Resource Center. They are located in the Student Services Complex, room A-143. The telephone number is 895-0866 / TDD 895-0652. For more information see [http://studentlife.unlv.edu/disability/](http://studentlife.unlv.edu/disability/)

**Academic Assistance:** Students needing additional help with written assignments are encouraged to make use of the Writing Center. You can find information on their policies and location at [http://writingcenter.unlv.edu](http://writingcenter.unlv.edu). Tutoring is available through the Academic Success Center: [http://academicsuccess.unlv.edu/tutoring](http://academicsuccess.unlv.edu/tutoring).
Schedule of readings and assignments:

August 27: Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (1565-75); Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (2240-49)

September 1, 3: Plato, *Republic* (33-37, 49-80)

September 8, 10: Aristotle, *Poetics* (86-117)

September 15: Longinus, *On Sublimity* (135-54)


September 22: David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste” (483-99); Samuel Johnson, Preface to Shakespeare (458-62, 468-80)

September 24: Percy Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* (695-717)

September 29: exam one due; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, *Capital*, Letter to Joseph Bloch (759-63, 774-88)

October 1: Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” (870-84)

October 6: Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (913-29)

October 8: Théophile Gautier, preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (750-59); Oscar Wilde, Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (895-99)

October 13: Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (956-77)

October 15: J. L. Austin, “Performative Utterances” (1427-42)

October 20: William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy” and “The Affective Fallacy” (1371-1403)

October 22: Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1403-14)

October 27: exam two due; Roland Barthes, selections (1457-75)

October 29: Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1476-1508)


November 5: Guy Fawkes Day; no class.


November 19: Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (2179-92)


December 1: Stanley Fish, “Interpreting the *Variorum*” (2067-89); Stephen Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, “Against Theory” (2458-75)

December 3: last class

December 10: **Exam three due**