

English 300: Introduction to Literary Criticism and Theory

Professor Matthew Hannah

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Meeting Time/Place: T/Th 12-1:20/Condon 360
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“But there is in everything a reasonable division of labour. I have written the book, and nothing on earth would induce me to read it.”

— G.K. Chesterton

“Beyond the fiction of reality, there is the reality of the fiction.” —Slavoj Žižek

Literary criticism is an important activity that has existed almost as long as literature itself has been written. Yet, the activity seems hard to define. Does “literary criticism” refer to the work of critics who weigh in on the “value” of contemporary works? Or is the literary critic a scholar whose works remain isolated to a community of scholars? Both definitions can be correct and both seem unsatisfying to meet the challenges of our contemporary moment.

Instead, I want this course to offer something more dynamic to you as intellectuals in the 21st century. Rather than simply show you how to be a literary critic, I want to reevaluate the role of criticism itself by exploring the theory behind criticism. Although this work will prove challenging, you will leave this course with an understanding of the major philosophical underpinnings of literary criticism. And I hope you will also leave this course with new optics for considering the world around you, for, at heart, I believe that literary criticism works best when we extend it to consider the sociopolitical elements that inform literary and cultural objects and make claims about our society based on this culture. Thus, literary criticism is a radical act, a questioning of values and beliefs, an interpretation of the world.



“The Treachery of Images” 1928-1929
Rene Magritte, Oil on Canvas

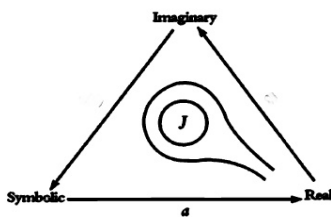


Diagram by Jacques Lacan

Required Texts:

Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*

Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*

Various PDFs (available on Canvas)

Optional Text:

Joseph Childers, *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary*

Assignments and Grading:

Writing Assignments: 50%
Presentation: 20%
Creative Project: 20%
Participation: 10%
Total: 100%



Saussure's "sign"

Writing Assignments:

You will choose **five** theoretical frameworks from the 10 we study over the course of the term and write a 2-3 page essay applying the central theoretical concept to the literary text (Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper"). These short position papers will give you a chance to use the theory we read as part of your own literary criticism. Be sure you cite any sources you use in your position papers. These are due by the following Monday for the week's reading so choose in advance which theories you will be interested in using.

Presentation:

Each student will be responsible for serving as a discussion leader for one of the theories we read. This means you will work extra hard that week to read and understand the material, prepare notes for class, and lead discussion of the text. Although you will not give a formal presentation, you will be assessed based on how well you discuss and disseminate the theory for your class.

Creative Project:

This is an opportunity for you to channel the issues we cover in the theoretical and critical texts we read into an original creative project. The line between art, literature, and theory is very thin, and many critical theorists were also novelists or painters. Furthermore, some of the theory we read is easier to understand when it is considered as literary art, a kind of hybrid. You will work in small groups to design and create an original creative project, which we will exhibit on the final day of class. Some projects you might consider: a collage based on a theorist's work or concept, a digital humanities project or exhibition, an original literary theory of your own, a sculpture or other plastic art project, or a poster project. Be creative!

Participation:

Because this class covers so much ground and requires significant effort on your part, I will grade your participation. This means much more than simply coming to class. Participation will be earned through evidence of careful note taking, thoughtful discussion, serious consideration and engagement with the material, and coming to office hours.

Class Schedule:

Readings are due on the day they are listed. PDFs should either be printed or available to you in class.

Week 1: Introduction: Theory and Culture

Tuesday 3-29: Introductions, What does Theory "Do"?

Thursday 3-31: **Read:** Culler, “Preface,” Ch. 1 “What is Theory?” (1-17), Ch. 2 “What is Literature and Does it Matter?” (18-41), Ch. 3 “Literature and Cultural Studies” (42-54); **Read:** Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (online—we use this story as the basis for your position papers and class discussions)

Week 2: “Well Wrought Urns”: New Criticism and Formalism

Tuesday 4-5: **Read:** Barry, Ch. 2 “Structuralism” (38-58); Ch. 12 “Narratology” (214- 37).

Thursday 4-7: **Read:** Brooks, “The Formalist Critics” (Canvas [7pp.]); Saussure, “Course in General Linguistics” (Canvas [14 pp.]); Jakobson, “Two Aspects of Language” (Canvas [5 pp.]

Week 3: “All that is Solid Melts into Air”—Marxist Criticism

Tuesday 4-12: **Read:** Barry, Ch. 8 “Marxist criticism” (150-65)

Thursday 4-14: **Read:** Marx, “The German Ideology” (Canvas [5 pp.]); Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (Canvas [10 pp.]), Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Canvas [7 pp.]

Week 4: “Deconstructing” Discourse: Post-structuralist Criticism

Tuesday 4-19: **Read:** Barry, Ch. 3 “Post-structuralism and Deconstruction” (59-76).

Thursday 4-21: **Read:** Derrida, “Différance” (Canvas [22 pp.]); Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (Canvas [7 pp.]

Week 5: Probing the Cultural Unconscious: Psychoanalytic Criticism

Tuesday 4-26: **Read:** Barry, “Psychoanalytic Criticism” (96-115)

Thursday 4-28: **Read:** Freud “The Interpretation of Dreams (Canvas [22 pp.]); Lacan, “The Symbolic Order” (Canvas [6 pp.]

Week 6: “The Sex Which Is Not One”: Feminist Criticism

Tuesday 5-3: **Read:** Barry, Ch. 6 “Feminist Criticism” (116-31)

Thursday 5-5: **Read:** Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (Canvas [11 pp.]); Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference (Canvas [7 pp.]

Week 7: Queer(ing) Theory

Tuesday 5-10: **Read:** Barry, Ch. 7 “Lesbian / Gay Criticism” (134-47).

Thursday 5-12: **Read:** Sedgwick, “Between Men” (Canvas [16 pp.]); Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” (Canvas [8 pp.]

Week 8: “Western Hypocrisy”: Postcolonial Criticism and Ethnic Studies

Tuesday 5-17: **Read:** Barry, Ch. 10 “Postcolonial Criticism” (185-94); Rivkin and Ryan, “English Without Shadows, Literature on a World Scale” (Canvas [4 pp.]).

Thursday 5-19: **Read:** Said, *Orientalism* (Canvas [14 pp.]); Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Canvas [8 pp.])

Week 9: The “Green” Revolution: Ecocriticism

Tuesday 5-24: **Read:** Barry, Ch. 11 “Ecocriticism” (248-64)

Thursday 5-26: **Read:** Buell, “Toxic Discourse” (Canvas [24 pp.]); Heise, “Greening English” (Canvas [10 pp.])

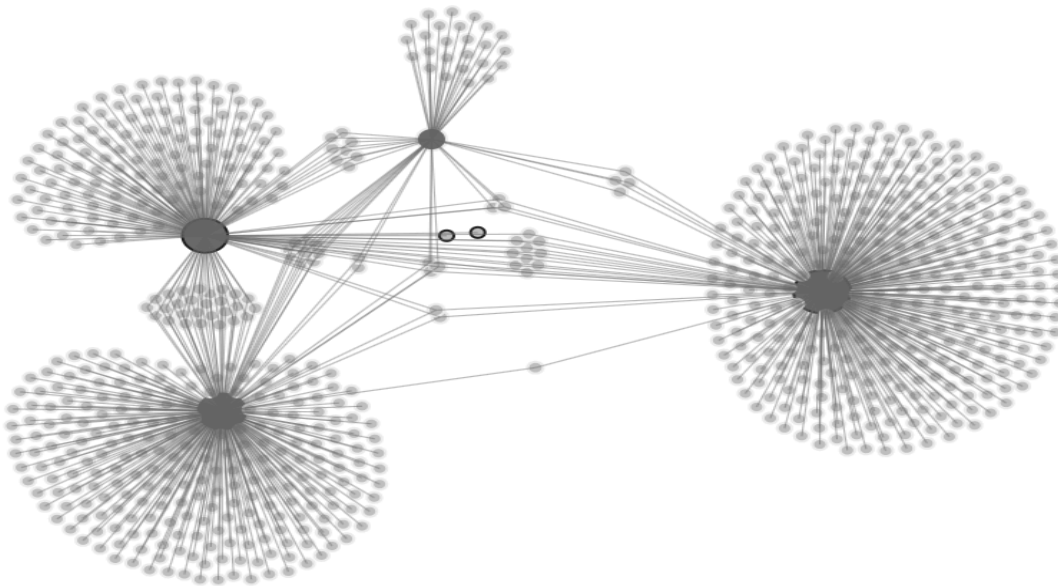
Week 10: Macroanalysis and Digital Humanities

Tuesday 5-31: **Read:** Kirschenbaum, “What is Digital Humanities and What’s it Doing in English Departments?” (Canvas [9 pp.]); Fitzpatrick, “The Humanities, Done Digitally” (Canvas [4 pp.])

Thursday 6-2: **Read:** Moretti, “Style Inc.: Reflections on 7,000 Titles” (Canvas [30 pp.])

Week 11

Monday 6-5: Final Projects Due.



Macroanalysis

Course Policies

Academic Honesty: All work submitted in this course must be your own and be written exclusively for this course, which means you may not submit papers or portions of papers you have written for any other course. The use of sources (ideas, quotations, paraphrases) must be properly documented. Please refer to the

Student Conduct Code on the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards website. In cases where academic misconduct has been clearly established, the award of an “F” for the final course grade is the standard practice of the English Department. Please see me if you have any questions about your use of sources.

Attendance: You are allowed three absences before your absence will be reflected in the final grade. Four absences will lower your final grade by 1/3 of a letter, five by a whole letter, and six equals an automatic fail.

Late Work: Work handed in late will be reduced by one third of a letter grade for each day late. For example, a B+ essay that has been turned in a day late will earn a “B” grade. If you are absent from class due to illness, an electronic submission sent by the time class regularly begins will be accepted. Otherwise, the assignment will be considered late unless you’ve made prior arrangements with me.

Grading and Expectations: “Introductory” and “100-level” does not mean “easy.” You will be held to English department standards in terms of your in-class participation, your display of course mastery on exams and quizzes, and the structure, argument, grammar, and mechanics of your writing. The reading and written work for this course may be heavy at times. The English department’s grading policy is on Blackboard.

Access: The University of Oregon is working to create inclusive learning environments. Please notify me in week one if there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in disability-related barriers to your participation. You may also wish to contact the Accessible Education Center in 164 Oregon Hall at 541-346-1155 or uoaec@uoregon.edu.

Learning Outcomes for the English Department:

1. Read literary and cultural texts with discernment and comprehension and with an understanding of their conventions;
2. Draw on relevant cultural and/or historical information to situate texts within their cultural, political, and historical contexts;
3. Perform critical, formal analyses of literary, cinematic, and other cultural texts;
4. Write focused, analytical essays in clear, grammatical prose;
5. Employ logic, creativity, and interpretive skills to produce original, persuasive arguments;
6. Employ primary and/or secondary sources, with proper acknowledgment and citation, as they contribute to a critical essay’s thesis.

*History repeats itself, first as tragedy,
second as farce.*

- Karl Marx