

English 372, Contemporary Literary Theory: Post-Modernity & Imagination,  
Fall 2008

MWF 1100-1150am KING 339  
Pat Day, Rice 114 Office Hrs.; W 1:30-3 & by Arrangement

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Though we will look at literary theory from as early as 1798, this course focuses on literary theory since 1966, specifically the writing of the theorists who travel under the name 'post-structuralists' (in the United States—in France they all get called structuralists) and the theorists that followed in their wake. In the second half of the course we will explore the relation of post-structuralism to attempts to define 'post-modernity' as both an artistic mode and a cultural moment.

This is not a 'tool box' course, meant to show you how to use theory as a method for produce readings of texts. We'll consider theory as a body of writing, part of the literary and artistic world, not as a kind of 'science' of literature, or art. The literature, film, etc that we look at in the course is not, then, meant as objects for us to apply theory to, but as part of the on-going imaginative activity of our moment. We'll be concerned with understanding why there is a line drawn between art and theory, and whether that line still has value. One catch phrase you can apply to this course is "Read theory as literature, read literature as theory."

Our central concern is with the value and status of imagination as embodied in art in our post-modern cultural and historical moment. Why do we care about literature—and more generally art-- and what uses the imagination has today are the essential questions for the semester.

Week/Date	Readings	Supplemenatry Readings
Week 1 9/3 WF	<p><b>For Friday: ERes:</b>            "The Dehumanization of Art" by Ortega Y Gasset            "Tradition and the Individual Talent"            T. S. Eliot            "The Heresy of Paraphrase" by Cleanth Brooks</p> <p><b>On Blackboard:</b>            William Wordsworth "Tintern Abbey"            Samuel Taylor Coleridge "Kubla Khan"            John Keats "Ode on a Grecian Urn"</p>	Samuel Taylor Coleridge selections from <u>The Biographia Literaria</u> William Wordsworth Preface to <u>Lyrical Ballads</u> Matthew Arnold "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" I. A. Richards "Communication and the Artist" W.K. Wimsatt, Jr. & Monroe C. Beardsley "The Intentional Fallacy"
Week 2	"The Object of Study" & "The Nature of the Linguistic Sign" by Sausurre	Sigmund Freud "The Uncanny and The Dreamwork"

9/8	"Polemical Introduction" by Northrop Frye "Literary Genres" by Tzvetan Todorov "Structuralism & Literature by Gerard Genette	Jean Piaget "Introduction and Location of Problems" from <i>Structuralism</i> Joseph Campbell "Myth and Dream" from <i>The Hero with a Thousand Faces</i> Claude Levi-Strauss "The Structural Study of Myth"
Week 3 9/15	"Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" & from <i>Of Grammatology</i> by Jacques Derrida, "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious" by Jacques Lacan "What is an Author?" by Michel Foucault	"The Library of Babel" & "Pierre Menard, Author of <i>Don Quixote</i> " by Jorge Luis Borges
Week 4 9/22	<i>Housekeeping</i> by Marilyn Robinson	"
Week 5 9/29	"The Death of the Author" & <i>The Pleasures of the Text</i> by Roland Barthes, "Sorties" & "The Laugh of the Medusa" by Helene Cixous	"Against Interpretation" by Susan Sontag "The New Sentence" by Ron Silliman
Week 6 10/6	Wolfgang Iser "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." "Interpreting the Variorum" by Stanley Fish, "Race, Gender & The Politics of Reading" by Michael Awkward	V. N. Voloshinov : "Social Interaction and the Bridge of Words"
<b>Week 8</b> <b>10/13</b>	<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood	
<b>Fall Break</b> 10/20		
Week 8 10/27	"Genealogy, Nietzsche, History" by Michel Foucault, "Orientalism" by Edward Said, "Literature, History, and Politics," by Catherine Belsey, "Against Tradition: Towards a Particularized Theory of Literary History" by Marilyn Butler	Georg Lukacs "The Ideology of Modernism" Hans Robert Jauss, from <i>Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory</i>
Week 9 11/3	<i>'Salem's Lot</i> by Stephen King	
Week 10 11/10	"The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," by Frederic Jameson "Manifesto for Cyborgs" by Donna Harraway, "Simulation and Simulacrum" by Jean Baudrillard <i>JF Lyotard Rewriting Modernity</i>	Gregory Ulmer "The Miranda Warnings: An Experiment in Hyperrhetoric"
Week 11 11/17	<i>Without You, I'm Nothing</i> , produced by Jonathan Krane, dir. Joh Boskovich, written by Sandra Bernhardt & John Boskovich F: "Untitled Movie Stills" by Cindy Sherman	
Week 12 11/24( M-W)	M The Avant Garde & the Sublime J. F. Lyotard	.

	W "These Lacustrine Cities" by John Ashbery	
Week 13 12/1	"The Post-Modern Prometheus" produced, directed, and written by Chris Carter <i>The Man in the High Castle</i> by Philip K. Dick	Draft of final essay due this week
Week 14 12/8 MW	<i>The Man in The High Castle</i>	

All these readings are available in Eres, except where noted. A hard copy of each should also be available in the reserve room. For secondary readings available only in hard copy, see the end of the syllabus

### Mechanics of the Course.

1) I assume valuable things happen in class sessions. I take attendance; I expect you to keep track of your attendance too, because "I didn't realize I'd missed that many classes" is not an excuse. We only have 39 classes, less than 39 hours over the semester. More than 3 absences will affect your grade. The issue is not why you are absent but that you have missed class, which is an essential part of the course; missing class sessions is no different than not handing in written work. In the economy of your existence, some things may seem more important to you than attending class; I recognize that and don't take such choices personally, but you need to understand there are consequences to such decisions. You may get sick or have family emergencies, but the best way to deal with that is to make sure you come to class, so if those things happen, illness and emergencies won't affect your grade. If you miss more than 8 classes, you **will** NE/F the course.

This also means showing up on time. I'm aware that things happen, but regularly strolling in 5 minutes after class starts is a very bad idea. If this happens too often, this too will affect your grade.

2) You have to participate in the class. Participation doesn't mean talking a lot, it means being engaged in the interchange among the members of the class: asking good questions, responding to other people's questions, thinking before you talk. In order to prepare you should before each class, take some time to write about the topic/assignment for the day; even a short paragraph is enough. You should also write down questions you would like to raise. I may not always collect these pieces of writing, but I expect you do this because this will help you get more out of the course.

Talking in groups such as a class is a skill, every bit as much as writing is. It's a skill worth having, because in fact a lot of work in all institutions gets done in that way. Being able to speak effectively in a group is, as they say, an important "self-empowerment." I know that a number of people have trouble speaking up in class. You should feel as free to consult me on strategies and methods for doing that as you'd to consult me about your writing.

At the end of the semester I may ask you to write a brief report and self-evaluation on your participation.

3) You have to form, with other members of the course, a discussion group that meets outside of class once a week. Some groups prefer to meet before discussions and/or lectures, other prefer to meet after. That's up to each group to decide. Groups should be 4 people, 5 maximum. Each week I want each group to hand in a question/comment/manifesto you've come up with together to be posted on Blackboard.

### **Incomplete Policy**

Academic or emergency incompletes are yours to take if you want, as long as you are in good standing in the course. You don't need to tell me the story, unless you want to; I trust that you wouldn't take an incomplete without a good reason. "Good Standing" means that you have completed all the work assigned for the first module and the short essays for the second module. If you have missed more than 6 classes, you are not in good standing.

### **The Honor Code**

It should go without saying that I expect you to hand in your own work, not somebody else's. Thus obvious cheating--buying papers off the net, using somebody else's essay from another course, lifting unacknowledged sections from other people's writing--is plagiarism. You simply can't learn anything from this sort of thing. If you do these things you will face the Honor Board.

But having a real intellectual life does not mean hiding from other people's thoughts in hopes of staying "original" but instead responding imaginatively and creatively to the influence of other people's ideas. I expect you to read each other's writing and talk to each other about your ideas. If you find suggestions, comments or observations by someone in the class, or even someone you know outside the class, particularly important to your thinking and writing, you can acknowledge them in the text or in a note.

According to the College rules, each piece of written work must be accompanied by the Honor Pledge ("I have adhered to the Honor Code in completing this assignment.")

### **Writing Assignments**

- \* Written work must be handed in on time.
- \* Late essays will be accepted at the discretion of the instructor

- \* All work must be handed in to get credit for the course.
- \* Hard copy must be typed, double-spaced, stapled, pages numbered.
- \* Backs of previously used paper is fine for drafts; final version should be printed on both sides of the sheet.
- \* Essays must have a title, though they don't have to have a cover sheet.
- \* References should be in the following form: (Wordsworth, "Preface" p. 2) with full citation in end notes

### **Short Assignments**

#1. A 750 (4 pages) word essay explaining why you're taking the course and what specifically you want to get out of it. The assignment can be found at the end of the syllabus

#2. Midterm essay, 1200 words. (5 pages) This essay will take the form of a reflection on what we have done in the first half of the semester. You may revise or reflect back upon your first essay, or you can write something totally new. Due the week before Spring Break

### **One Short Essay each Module**

I'll assign each of you 2 days on which you have a short essay due. Essays should be about 5 pages.. You need to keep track of when your essay is due, as I won't remind you individually about this. "I didn't realize it was due last week" is not an excuse. Specifics of this assignment are on Blackboard.

### **The Final Essay**

A 3000+ word (10-12 pages) essay on a topic of your choice. The essay will be developed over the course of the semester in five stages. I am open to proposals for different kinds of final projects, though they will require a proposal, a progress report, and a final report/reflection on the project. The assignment is on line on Blackboard.

#1 Proposal. Due week 11. A brief 500 word explanation of what you think you want to write about and why you think this is important.

#2 First Draft. Due week 13. I'll read and comment on this draft. It should be as complete as possible, but I don't expect a "finished" product.

#3 Final Draft.

### **How I comment on your written work.**

The comments on your writing will be, as one former student put it, "ambiguous." I don't do much "this is good, that's bad" commenting. The comments I make are intended to help you think about what you've written, raising issues you may want to consider in revising, or writing about in the next short essay. I do this because you need to develop the ability to judge your own work, rather than to always expect to be told whether it is good or bad by someone else. Thus, I may not always comment on your short essays.

For specific advice on how to revise, what to do with a particular argument, etc., we should set up a conference.

### Grading

Though you will get comments and responses to your work, you won't receive any grades over the course of the semester. This isn't because the grade is unimportant (if it was unimportant we wouldn't give it, would we?) but because the work in the course is part of a process, rather than a sequence of discrete units. If I am trying to encourage you to use your writing to be experimental and speculative, leading to your final essay, it makes little sense to grade it along the way.

I also think that micro-evaluation becomes overbearing and keeps people from learning how to realistically evaluate their own work, which I think is a major goal of liberal arts education.

If you want a sense of how you're doing, you should feel free to come and speak to me about your work. I will be able to tell you if you are making what I see as reasonable progress, what things you may want to work on, what things you seem to be doing best. I won't be able to be extremely precise about a grade equivalent, however.

Occasionally students will ask about a response to an essay or a final grade by saying "I worked very hard on this essay." I assume, absent clear evidence to the contrary, that *everybody* works hard. I can't evaluate anything but what I can see and hear--the things you write, what you say in class, etc. The grade in a course can't really evaluate how hard you worked, just as it doesn't directly reflect what you have learned. It reflects my professional evaluation of the work you produced. This doesn't seem at all unfair to me--it is simply built into the grading system as it exists.

What Kinds of Things You Do in Writing and Discussing.

Learn to understand the relation between **reactions** "Golly, I never laughed so much" "I hate that essay." "This story makes me feel good." **Opinions** "That artifice is weird" "I didn't like that movie." "I think Michael Corelone is really cool," and **Responses**. Reactions and opinions are valuable because they can provide raw material for responding to a work of art, but **response** is a considered reflection on your engagement with a work. It involves thoughts, reactions, but most of all it requires the exercise of judgment. We can decide that the fact that King Lear reminds us of our

Uncle Moe isn't particularly relevant to our response to the movie. We can decide that our opinion doesn't stand up to serious consideration. Reactions and opinions fall into the realm of more or less spontaneous outbursts. They are real, but they just are what they are. In responding to a work, we try to combine our thoughts and feeling to develop a more or less coherent response. Response have to be 'backed up' you have to have a warrant for what you say. "Michael Coreleone is cool because...." is the form by which we turn reaction into a complex feeling, an opinion into an idea. We want to know what the warrant, the evidence, the reason behind a response.

Response to a work of art is complex, bringing together spontaneous reactions and opinions with serious consideration of those reactions and a careful attention to both the work and our reactions. When we give our responses a form, as in an essay we're engaged in four processes—they are recursive, not sequential, but they lay out like this:

**Description:** get an accurate sense of the actual details and qualities of the work. "Huck Finn is about Huck and Jim's journey on a raft and their encounters with people on the banks of the Mississippi." "T.S. Eliot argues that tradition is a self-sustaining system in which new works join older ones as art that survives over time."

**Analysis:** Analysis is about understanding the relation of the parts of a work to each other, the dynamic that makes the work become a whole. "In *Huckleberry Finn*, the relationship between the river and the bank defines the relationship between nature and society." "The randomness of Huck's adventures contrasts with the single, inexorable direction of the journey." "Tom Sawyer serves as Huck's 'civilized alter ego thorough the novel, until finally Huck is mistaken for Tom by Aunt Sally"

**Interpretation:** Interpretation moves from understand what the text is, and how its parts fit together, to what it says, what its underlying coherence might be. "In *Huckleberry Finn* Twain explores the idea that whether in nature or society, there is 'no more show for freedom' whatever we do." "*Huckleberry Finn* explores the meaning of humor in relation to the social horrors Huck encounters through the novel."

**Reflection:** An interpretation attempts to specify one way in which the work as a whole signifies, what it says. But this is not the same as the work's Meaning. Meaning is created when we begin to think about the work's significance, when we seek to understand why this statement or communication is important, valuable, worth thinking about. You are asking yourself the question—if all this description, analysis, and interpretation makes sense, what do I want to say about it? What do I want to tell someone about *Huckleberry Finn*, and why should they care?

Your goal should be to move from reactions, opinion, description, and analysis toward interpretation and reflection.

I don't have any grade quotas--if everybody in the course does A work, I have no problem giving everybody an A. But I want to make clear that I consider B- to be a

perfectly good grade; if anything lower than a B+ is unacceptable to you, maybe you should consider taking another course.

### Secondary Readings on Reserve

**Structuralism and Since**, edit by John Sturrock. Bio-critical essays on the “Big Five” Structuralism & Post-Structuralism—Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault.

Three Short (@100 pages) on major influences on contemporary theory

Heidegger by **Michael Inwood**  
 Freud by **Anthony Storr**  
 Nietzsche by **Michael Tanner**

Primary Works by these writers.

Heidegger **Basic Writings**  
 Freud Civilization and its Discontents  
 Nietzsche The Genealogy of Morals

Critical essays applying “theory” to a particular work

Frederick Karl, "Introduction to *Danse Macabre*: Conrad's **Heart of Darkness**"  
 (biographical/historical)

Adena Rosmarin, "Darkening the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism and **Heart of Darkness**"

Johanna Smith, "Too Beautiful Altogether: Patriarchal Ideology in **Heart of Darkness**"  
 (feminism)

J. Hillis Miller, "**Heart of Darkness** Revisited" (deconstruction)

Brook Thomas, "Preserving and Keeping Order by Killing Time in **Heart of Darkness**"

Warren Montag, "The Workshop of Filthy Creation: A Marxist Reading of **Frankenstein**"

Lee Heller, "**Frankenstein** and the Uses of Cultural Criticism"

### Writing Assignment #1

It's useful for people in the course to get an idea of why other folks are here. It's also useful for you to clarify for yourself why you're taking a particular course and what your expectations are. It's also important for this course to get used to the idea of writing as public communication rather than either private reflection or an address exclusively to the instructor.

In this essay of about 4 pages in hard copy try to explain what you think "theory" is about and why you want to spend a semester studying it. You may want to think about how you imagine this course fitting into the other courses you've taken and are taking at Oberlin. This account will by necessity be intimate but need not be personal; that is, rather than an autobiographical narrative, you're communicating the ideas you currently hold about this subject more than the route by which you got there, though some personal details may be relevant here, too. If you haven't had the time to reflect much on why you're taking the course, this would be a good time to start.