

Contemporary Critical Theory

This course is an introduction to contemporary critical theory. We will survey the major trends and movements that have influenced literary criticism over the latter half of the 20th and early 21st c., including structuralism, deconstruction, historicism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, gender studies, and post-colonialism. Our larger aim, however, will be to explore some of the abiding themes that have constituted these lines of thought as a body of critical writing we now term “theory” today. Rather than a toolbox of technical terms or a fad that literary studies is always “after,” these themes can be understood as an ongoing conversation – one that necessarily shapes our choices and habits as readers and teachers of literature.

Our focus this semester will be on navigating three definitive problems for theory: *language*; *history*; and *aesthetics*. Since Plato, the status of the artist in relation to the community has been, in effect, always the dominant question in writing about literature. Over the 20th c., this question, however, was displaced by a set of concerns about the inherent dilemma of representation, or signification, itself: Is language a stable or destabilizing force for authors and readers? Is there one history of literature to be told or several? What are the structures of cultural, sexual, and political power that shape its critical construction? Can art say anything distinctive, at all, in the technicized landscape of the modern and postmodern world?

While popular culture routinely portrays these kinds of questions as a symptom of postmodern malaise, they represent, together, a sustained attempt to find another, more refined language of literary and aesthetic description – one that does not presume a supposedly unified model of hermeneutics (or interpretation), the human subject, or cultural authority. We will practice refining this language ourselves this term by testing our reading in theory against a handful of literary works that feature characters wrestling with their own self-authorizing gesture, and with the crisis, even madness, of representing the self as a work of art. Our objective will be to situate these primary literary works carefully in relation to the theory – our main focus – while, in the process, observing how their theoretical construction impacts the work of literary criticism.

Texts

Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd edn. (Blackwell, 2004)
Robert Dale Parker, *How to Interpret Literature*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 2011)
Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 1997)
Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Grace Ioppolo (Norton Critical Edn, 2007)
V. S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men: A Novel* (Vintage, 2001)
Nella Larsen, *Passing* (Penguin, 2003)
Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (Coffee House Press, 2011)

Objectives

- To gain a working knowledge of a variety of critical theories and methods and their importance for literary scholarship
- To read carefully a handful of core poststructuralist texts, and to be able to trace their lines of influence through contemporary critical perspectives
- To become familiar with Marxist, psychoanalytic, postcolonial, and feminist approaches
- To improve as writers, and to learn how to make thoughtful connections in one’s own prose between challenging texts and works of literature

Assignments

Paper #1	20%
Paper #2 (with prospectus)	30%
Participation & Weekly Responses	20%
Presentation	10%
Critical Manifesto & Final Exam	20%

Papers

You will write two essays this term: a paper on *King Lear* (5 pp.) that situates an analysis of one passage of the play in relation to the theorists covered in weeks 2-4 of the course, and a second paper (5-7 pp.) on a primary text of your choice from the middle of the course that draws upon an assigned work of theory and your own reading in secondary criticism. Writing prompts will be provided well in advance of each assignment.

Weekly Responses

On the dates specified below (see *), you will write a 1-page, single-spaced written response on the week's assigned reading. Your written responses may be inquisitive and exploratory in nature but should demonstrate serious engagement with the assigned reading, providing textual evidence (quotations), and detailed summary and analysis to support your claims. Each written response should contain at least two well-crafted paragraphs as well as the following components: a close examination of one of the theoretical texts we have read for that week, and a connection between its claims and concepts and our literary readings.

Article Presentation

In groups of two, you will each give one 10-12 min. presentation this semester on a critical article and its relationship to our readings. A sign-up sheet for presentation dates as well as detailed instructions will be distributed in week two. All student presenters will be required to meet with me to discuss their presentation, with a list of 2-3 proposed articles, at least one week before their scheduled presentation date.

Critical Manifesto

Your final assessment in the course will be based on two criteria: a short "critical manifesto" (2-3 pp., single-spaced) that makes an argument about which theoretical approach or theorist we have studied this term that you find most valuable; and a short oral exam (20 min.) in which you will explain your manifesto and position it in relation to your knowledge of our other readings in the course. Oral exams will be scheduled during finals week May 8-11.

Course Schedule

Note: this schedule is subject to change based on our progress through the semester. Explicit instructions will be provided in class or by email if changes become necessary.

week 1	1.23	Introduction: Beyond reading, or A "practical" criticism? Culler, <i>Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction</i> , chs. 1 & 2 Fish, "Interpretive Communities" (LT 217-221)
week 2	1.30*	Shakespeare, <i>King Lear</i> Nowotny, "Lear's Questions" (Vista) Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying" (LT 262-5) and Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (Vista) Parker, "New Criticism" and "Structuralism" (11-58)
week 3	2.6*	Derrida, "Différance" (LT 278-99) and Johnson, "Writing" (LT 340-7) Calderwood, "Creative Uncreation in <i>King Lear</i> " (Vista) Parker, "Deconstruction" (86-102)
week 4	2.13*	Foucault, from <i>The Archaeology of Knowledge</i> (LT 90-6) and from <i>Discipline and Punish</i> (LT 549-66) Greenblatt, "Shakespeare and the Exorcists" (LT 592-620) Parker, "New Historicism" (244-59)
week 5 (t.b.d.)		Freud "On Narcissism," "The Uncanny," and "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (LT 415-437) Adelman, from <i>Suffocating Mothers</i> (Norton 209-226)

		Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (Vista) Parker, "Psychoanalysis" (112-147)	
week 6	2.27	Lacan, "The Mirror Stage" (LT 441-6), Rubin, "The Traffic in Women" (LT 770-94) Parker, "Feminism" (148-66)	Paper 1 due
week 7	3.5*	Foucault, from <i>The History of Sexuality</i> (LT 892-899) and Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" (LT 900-11) Larsen, <i>Passing</i> , Parts 1-2 Parker, "Queer Studies" (179-208)	
week 8	3.12*	Fanon, "The Negro and Psychopathology" (LT 462-9) López, "The Social Construction of Race" (LT 964-74) Larsen, <i>Passing</i> , Part 3	
<i>3.19 No class – Spring Break</i>			
week 9	3.26*	Naipaul, <i>The Mimic Men</i> 1-98 Walder, "History" (LT 1075-88) and Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders" (LT 1167-83) Parker "Post-Colonialism" (270-85)	
week 10	4.2*	Naipaul, <i>The Mimic Men</i> 100-215 Marx (LT 650-3, 665-72), Gramsci "Hegemony" (LT 673), and Williams, "Marxism and Literature" (Vista) Parker, "Marxism" 211-20	
week 11	4.9	Naipaul, <i>The Mimic Men</i> , 219-300 Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (LT 693-702) Parker, 221-32, 285-93; handout on Spivak	Prospectus due
week 12	4.16*	Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" (LT 674-85) Lerner, <i>Leaving the Atocha Station</i> 1-30	
week 13	4.23	Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (LT 1235-41) and Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry" (LT 1242-46) Lerner, <i>Leaving the Atocha Station</i> 33-78	Paper 2 due
week 14	4.30	Ranciere, from <i>The Politics of Aesthetics</i> (Vista); Certeau, "The Practice of Everyday Life" (LT 1247-57) Lerner, <i>Leaving the Atocha Station</i> , 78-181	
week 15	5.7	Ranciere, <i>Politics of Aesthetics</i> (cont.'d); Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition" (LT 355-64) In-class presentation of "manifesto"	Critical Manifesto due
			5.8-5.11 Oral Exam (by appointment)

Additional Policies

Attendance

Please plan to attend all class sessions as class time and discussion are essential for negotiating the difficult reading material we will be covering in our course. You are allowed no more than two absences for the semester. Three absences or more will result in a reduction of your final grade; four absences will result in automatic failure.

Late Work

All formal essays are due on the assigned date at the beginning of class. Late papers will be reduced $\frac{1}{2}$ letter grade for each day they are late. I will automatically award *one* 48-hour extension for the semester for any paper of your choice. Please use it wisely. Requests for an extension must be received in writing by email at least one day in advance of the deadline.

Weekly responses are due at the beginning of class on the dates listed above (see *). Late responses will receive $\frac{1}{4}$ credit if they are placed in my mailbox the following day. After that, they will not be accepted.

Please note: *I do not accept written assignments via email.* If you know you will be absent on the due date, please make arrangements with me ahead of time to submit the assignment by other means.

Plagiarism

Do not plagiarize. All work submitted for a grade must be the student's own original work. Any use of published material in your written work must be fully and properly cited. Please feel free to speak with me if you have any questions about the proper use and citation of a source. On recognizing and avoiding plagiarism, see the entry on Plagiarism at the Online Writing Lab ("OWL"): <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/01/>.

Students with Disabilities

Southern Connecticut State University provides reasonable accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act for students with documented disabilities on an individualized basis. If you are a student with a documented disability, the University's Disability Resource Center (DRC) can work with you to determine appropriate accommodations. Before you receive accommodations in this class, you will need to make an appointment with the Disability Resource Center located at EN C-105A. To discuss your approved accommodations with me or other concerns, such as medical emergencies or arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment to meet as soon as possible.

Cell Phones

Please turn off all cell phones or place them on vibrate. As this is an evening class, it's understandable that you may need to receive an urgent call. If at all possible, please wait until break; if not, please excuse yourself quietly.