

HL4035 Practicing Theory: Literature and Meaning

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Critical Theory is a dynamic and stimulating field encompassing diverse intellectual approaches to issues of meaning, representation, identity, power and ideology. The course offers a hands-on approach to literary and critical theory. As the course consists of weekly seminars and does not feature lectures your engagement with reading materials is essential for making our weekly seminars productive, stimulating and enjoyable.

The central concern of this course is to explore the ways in which meaning is produced in contemporary culture and society. The course seeks to help you further develop the skills necessary for a better understanding of the application of critical theory and cultural studies approaches to contemporary literary, cultural and social practices and institutions. In order to tackle this task we will focus on issues of reality and representation, ideology and identity, humanity and animality, and gender and sexuality. By engaging in close reading and discussion of a number of theoretical and literary texts, you will be invited to re-think a wide array of apparently self-evident categories, such as literature and theory, form and content, and authorship and identity.

Learning Objective

This course draws on a wide variety of critical theories that explore questions pertinent to literary study without necessarily tracing a history of literary criticism. The aim is to equip students with an advanced understanding of important concepts of literary and critical theory. This course aims to do this by encouraging you to think about theory not as a collection of difficult and intimidating historical concepts and ideas, but as an exciting exercise in thinking about literature and meaning. The focus on first-hand engagement with texts invites students to deal with difficult and provocative material with confidence, thus developing their own critical practice.

Please note that this course is 100% CA (Continuous Assessment)

- a. Engagement and Class Discussion (10%)
- b. Online group work – mini essays due by Week 5 (20%)
- c. First essay in two drafts, 2000 words each (20% + 20%)
- d. Final essay, 2500 words (30%)

YOU WILL RECEIVE A DETAILED EXPLANATION OF EACH ASSESSMENT COMPONENT DURING OUR FIRST SEMINAR

Content

This course is designed for advanced students of literature. Based on close readings of key texts, the seminars will encourage their participants to critically examine the ways in which texts produce meaning.

THIS IS A PROVISIONAL SYLLABUS. YOU ARE RESPONSBLE FOR REFERRING TO THE SYLLABUS ON NTULEARN ONCE THE SEMESTER BEGINS

Week 1. Introduction: From Critical Reading to Critical Thinking

Catherine Belsey, "Traditional Criticism and Common Sense" in *Critical Practice* (Routledge 2002)

Excerpt from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Norton Critical Edition)

Week 2. Reality and Representation

Plato, *Republic* (Penguin Classics 2007), books VI-VII

Excerpt from Aristotle, *Poetics* (Penguin Classics 1996)

Excerpt from Catherine Belsey, *Culture and the Real: Theorizing Cultural Criticism* (Routledge 2004)

Week 3. Language and Meaning 1

Excerpt from Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Open Court 1998)

Excerpt from Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense" in Rivkin and Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Blackwell 1998)

Week 4. Language and Meaning 2

Victor Shklovsky, *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love* (Dalkey Archive Press 2001)

Week 5. Fiction and Originality

Jacques Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature" in *Acts of Literature* (Routledge 1992)

Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" in *Labyrinths* (New Directions 2007)

Week 6. Ideology and Identity

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Social Being and Consciousness" in *The German Ideology* (International Publishers 1970)

Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (Monthly Review Press 2001)

Week 7. The Meaning of "Normal"

Sigmund Freud, "The Sexual Aberrations" in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Martino Fine Books 2011)

Week 8. Identity and Sexuality

Judith Butler, "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions" in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge 2006)

Excerpts from Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (Vintage 1990)

Week 9. Humanity and Animality

Carrie Rohman, "The Animal among Others" in *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal* (Columbia UP 2008)

D.H. Lawrence "The Snake" and "Tortoise Shout" in *The Poems* (Cambridge UP 2013)

Week 10. Popular Culture 1

Theodor Adorno, "Culture industry reconsidered" in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (Routledge 2001)

Art Spiegelman, *Maus* (Penguin 2003)

Week 11. Popular Culture 2

Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production" and "The Market of Symbolic Goods" in *The Field of Cultural Production* (Polity Press 1993)

Week 12. Meaning and Power

Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host" in *The J. Hillis Miller Reader* (Stanford UP 2005)

Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (W. W. Norton & Company 1999)

Week 13. Conclusion: Theory and Literature

Michael Bell, "The Metaphysics of Modernism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge UP 2011)