English 108H

ISOLATION AND ALIENATION

Syllabus

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Alienation is often perceived as a uniquely modern disease, an attitude composed of increasing education (which often produces alienation) and an inadequate sense of history. Although we will concentrate on twentieth-century isolation and alienation, we will try to get some historical perspective on the problem.

Samuel Delany, a contemporary science fiction writer, opened a speech to a science fiction conference: "As opposed to style, there is no such thing as content." Because he is quite right, we will investigate how something is written determines what we perceive.

The course should provide at least six benefits:

1. the intense pleasure of reading a good book and sharing your responses with a group of compatible individuals who have also just completed the book (book clubs around the world meet regularly for just such pleasure);

2. by hearing from fellow students and the professor what the book "means" to them and WHY, an increased understanding of more effective reading;

3. by reading several books on the same theme in a variety of perennial concerns, a fuller appreciation of the diversity of response to the situation of life and an opportunity to work through anxieties and hangups vicariously;

4. to take back to your own work a wider view by reading material outside your normal ken and discussing it with others from widely varying disciplines;

5. to share your rhetorical speech and writing skills by speaking and writing to the class and professor on questions which require thought and synthesis, not just rote memory; and

6. most importantly, to expand your ability to synthesize what you learn by putting together what you learn from each book, lecture, and discussion with what you already know to form a useful pattern of knowledge.

To receive these benefits, you must do your part:

1. Read all the assigned works by the assigned date. You cannot hope to benefit fully from the lectures and discussions (which, unlike book reviews, assume a reading of the work) unless you have the expected listening readiness. You insult your classmates by asking questions or making statements based on ignorance of the work or later sections of the work during discussions.

2. Attend class regularly. I don’t take attendance, because I assume that if you’re not in class you have something more important to do. Conversely, you are responsible for anything you miss, either academic or administrative. However, missing often or without due cause sends a clear signal to your fellow students and to me that you don’t believe we can offer you enough insights to compensate you for your time.

3. Think about what you have read and be prepared at any time to comment usefully or to ask perceptive questions (or both) about your reading. Have opinions; express them; defend them with citation and interpretation from the works and from your experience of life.

4. As you read, take notes, make marginalia, ask yourself questions, answer them as you read on. Don’t just sit there sucking up the neat story; get actively involved with the reading experience. "Escape" reading or reading strictly for pleasure is great fun, but we don’t learn as much when we pay more active attention. When you finish a work or a section, sum up. Write a brief response, critique, ask questions about elements that puzzled you. Bring those notes to class and draw on them.
THE TEXTS

From the Bookstore:

In the Classroom:
Ledbetter, Ken. *Too Many Blackbirds*.
*Selected Readings in Isolation and Alienation*

SCHEDULE OF READINGS:

8 Jan.  *A Jest of God*
17 Jan.  *Grendel* Ch. 1-6
22 Jan.  *Grendel* Ch. 7-12
31 Jan.  *A Modest Proposal*
7 Feb.  *Too Many Blackbirds* Ch. 1-8
12 Feb.  *Too Many Blackbirds* Ch. 9-17
28 Feb.  *The Left Hand of Darkness* Ch. 1-10
5 Mar.  *The Left Hand of Darkness* Ch. 11-20
12 Mar.  *Lost in the Funhouse*
        "Frame Tale," "Night Sea Journey," "Ambrose His Mark"
19 Mar.  *LF*: "Lost in the Funhouse," "Echo," "Two Meditations"
21 Mar.  *LF*: "Title," "Glossofalia," "Life Story"

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Time

Plan to commit at least 108 hours of your time to this course (and up to 144 hours), plus whatever time you need to study for the final exam. That's an average of 9-12 hours per week for the next 12 weeks, or 2-3 hours outside of class for each class hour.

2. Class Format and Participation

Often I will lecture, hoping, however, to avoid the stereotyped lecture, in which the notes of the professor become the notes of the student without affecting the mind of either. At almost any time in any lecture, your question, addition, or correction is welcome. Occasionally I will want to finish a statement, idea, or demonstration before being interrupted and I will say so. But I will welcome your comment when I finish, so jot down a reminder for when I call for your point. This will not be a lecture course entirely, because you need to learn how to read and interpret more effectively and how to defend your interpretations to your peers. From hearing me lecture, you can learn how I and, occasionally, other scholars interpret literature, and you can pick up on cues on critical methodology, but you don't learn to do anything just by watching others; you must try it yourself. You cannot depend on an undefended idea any more than an untried faith. You don't really know how silly or how brilliant your interpretation is unless you let others break it or break themselves upon it.
Therefore, we will have class discussions and small group discussions, allowing you to air your ideas in non-intimidating contexts. These formats entail at least two responsibilities for you:

a. Attend class regularly (see 2 on page 2).

b. Demonstrate your careful reading and critical skill by contributing usefully to the literary analysis.

c. Offer to present a short (5-15 minute) seminar (from notes or manuscript) to share knowledge and expertise you have (or are willing to obtain) with your classmates. Reserve early because we may not have time for everyone to present. First come, first served. You may cancel without penalty until eight days before (to allow time to offer the seminar to others).

3. Written Work

To feel confident in your newly acquired knowledge and abilities, you will want to test it in some formal way. I will offer the opportunity to write essays (which test how thoroughly and yet efficiently you can demonstrate an hypothesis) and exams (which test how well you can synthesize what you have learned under time constraints).

**Essays**

You may write one or two essays of no more than 1500 words each on a subject mutually agreeable to you, the writer and me, one of the readers. I will suggest topics as we go along, but you may wish to have general suggestions to assist you in choosing a worthwhile but manageable topic:

1) comparing two authors’ handling of an idea
2) the effect of setting or narrative style or point of view in dealing with similar subject matter
3) comparing the function of familiar and unfamiliar character and/or characterization
4) analyzing in depth the crucial event or scene in a work
5) analyzing the effect of narrator unreliability
6) analyzing the effect of multiple narration

In considering your topic for approval I will use the following criteria:

1) Will researching or analyzing teach you something new? Or will it significantly overlap my lecture or class discussion?
2) Is it worth doing? Is it large enough, or small enough, for the time and space allotted? Is it significant, meaningful, useful? Will it adequately repay your effort?
3) Is it fresh and interesting? Have I already approved nine other essays on the same topic? When I read your essay, will the topic itself suggest intentional or accidental plagiarism?

If you write two essays, you must submit the first by 11 February so you can benefit from the critical commentary in writing your second, due 2 April. All essays submitted by 28 March will receive detailed critical and rhetorical marking in addition to the general assessment and letter grade later papers get. Submit all essays in duplicate. I will mark one and return it to you; the other will be available on reserve to your classmates as an additional study resource. To assist them in finding the information they want and you in checking your essay for focus, prepare a 50-100 word abstract stating your conclusions.

One week before the deadline, submit a brief prospectus of the essay including subject, approach, expected conclusions, and reference material.

**Exams**

You may take one or two of the three exams:

1. **First Midterm** -- based on the material through Ledbetter, offered on 26 February
2. **Second Midterm** -- based on the material since Ledbetter, offered during the last 90 minutes of the final exam.
3. **Final Exam** -- based on all the material, offered at the registrar's whim (too early, too late, or the wrong time of the day).

Obviously you may not take the Second Midterm and the Final Exam because they’re offered at the same time.
4. Marking Scheme

In assigning you a mark for the course, I need to know whether you have read the material, thought about the ideas presented, understood the writing techniques involved, and can communicate your ability to exercise your critical skills on the course material both orally and in writing. We all know some people talk more effectively, others write better. I want you to demonstrate your strengths while trying to improve your weakness. Therefore, the marking scheme will have flexibility:

1. Oral component
   a. Normal classroom participation
   b. Oral Seminar

2. Essays
   20% each

3. Exams
   a. Midterms
   b. Final
   20% each
       40%

I will assign at least 20% of your mark to each of oral, essay and exam; you determine where you want you want the other 40% up to the maximum allowed in each category: oral -- 40%, essays 40%, and exams 60%. If you produce work for more than 100%, you will force me to throw away the worst 20-40%.

THE PROFESSOR

I am available outside of class as well as in and enjoy talking with students, professionally and socially, so come by. I don’t bite and I’ve been known to serve a good cup of tea. Or, if it’s late enough in the day we could go for a beer. Or we could just sit and talk business. Although I am often in my office, I often work elsewhere (in the library or at home), so please do not come by expecting to find me outside the office hours.

Office: HH 270
Phone: x.2419

Office Hours:
9-12 MW, 1-2:30 TR
and by appointment