ENGLISH 208B

— Science Fiction —

Syllabus

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Despite Leslie Fiedler’s assertion that by the end of the century science fiction will not join mainstream literature but will become mainstream literature, English 208B has not yet taken its rightful place as one of the period courses required of all English honours students. Until it does, we may continue to read, savour, and discuss the works in the course for our mutual pleasure rather than the serious business of filling lined paper with generalizations of the professor and observations which you will outgrow before you find any use for them.

English majors and honours are welcome to the course, but they should recognize that the course does not have any prerequisites and is specifically aimed at non-majors. We will naturally deal with the elements of fiction (plot, action, setting, point of view, etc.), but they will come in incidentally as we try to come to grips with what the stories mean and how they mean. However, we will not allow the terminology of literary analysis to drive the discussion (or lecture). If non-majors reading this are taking their first English course since early in secondary school because they were turned off, thrice welcome! In this science fiction literature course, we will investigate both what makes it science fiction (its ideas and attitudes) and what makes it literature (its effective, sophisticated presentation).

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 in the same genre(?) on a variety of current 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. the opportunity 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 sharpen 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 novels by the assigned date. You cannot hope to benefit fully from the lectures and discussion (which, unlike book reviews, assume a reading of the book) unless you have the expected listening and participation readiness. You insult your classmates by asking questions or making statements based on ignorance of later sections of the book 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. However, you are responsible for anything you miss, either academic or administrative. Also, 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 citations and interpretation from the novels 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 as when we pay more active attention. Use study notes or questions when available. When you finish a book or a section, sum up. Write a brief response, critique, ask questions about elements that puzzle you. Bring those notes to class and draw on them.
THE TEXTS

My version of this course should, for the past dozen years, have been called the Science Fiction Novel. Since In Dreams Awake went out of print, I have not found a short story anthology that repays its trouble and expense. Science fiction short stories tend to have a single idea or mood, whereas the novel allows scope for developing an idea or relating several ideas and adding more effective characterization and other rewarding elements. In addition, discussion of short stories was frustrating, creating class dissention on when to stop discussing one and begin the next. Of course, the alternative, discussing only one per class period, was unthinkable. Finally, I like novels better than short stories. So the course contains novels only, although Miller's novel can be seen as related short stories published separately.

READING SCHEDULE

17 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Herland.
24 Arthur C. Clarke, Childhood's End.
31 Walter M. Miller, Jr. A Canticle for Leibowitz.

28 Ursula Le Guin, The Left Hand of Darkness.

Mar. 07 Sheri Tepper, Gate to Women's Country.
14 Suzette Haden Elgin, Native Tongue.
21 Greg Bear, Blood Music
28 William Gibson, Neuromancer

You will notice that Asimov, Bradbury, and Heinlein, among other, less famous science fiction writers, are conspicuous by their absence. I will not deny their seminal importance in the development of contemporary science fiction. If you have read their works, you have probably enjoyed the experience thoroughly. However, important as they may be for an understanding of the history of science fiction 1935-1970, they present no important literary challenges to a university audience.
Other books sometimes called great science fiction by those seeking to legitimize the genre did not make our reading list either, e.g.:

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1926)
George Orwell, *1984* (1949)

They do not appear because both their authors and their general readers do not perceive them as science fiction. We have plentiful material without including peripheral material, however fine the quality, although if you have never read the three novels mentioned above, place them at the very top of your “must read a.s.a.p.” list.

Books from the following list would appear in the syllabus but they are out of print. Add them to your list of great science fiction novels to read a.s.a.p.

- Samuel Delany, *The Einstein Intersection* (alias *The Fabulous Formless Darkness*)
- Joan Slonczewski, *A Door into Ocean*
- M.A. Foster, *The Gameplayers of Zan*
- James Gunn, *Kampus*
- Robert Sheckley, *Options*
- James Tiptree Jr., *Up the Walls of the World*
- Olaf Stapledon, *Sirius*
- Gene Wolfe, *The Fifth Head of Cerberus."

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

1. **Class Format and Participation**

Sometimes 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 the novels, and you can pick up 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 may have small group discussions, allowing you to air your ideas in non-intimidating contexts.
2. Essays

You may write one essay of no more than 1500 words (due no later than 5 April) 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 novel
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? Can I bear reading yet another essay on that topic? When I read your essay, will the topic itself suggest intentional or accidental plagiarism?

You will submit an essay prospectus by 16 March, announcing your specific topic, method of approach and expected conclusions.

3. Exams

You may write two exams:
1. Midterm -- based on the first five novels, offered on 16 February
2. Final exam -- based on all the novels, (but emphasizing the last five).
4. Marking Scheme

In assigning you a mark for the course, I need to know if 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 in writing.

1. Essay 30%
2. Exams
   a. Midterm 30%
   b. Final 40%

THE PROFESSOR

I am available outside of class as well as in and enjoy talking with students, professionally and socially, so come by. Feel free to discuss anything that interests or concerns you.

Although I am often in my office, I also work elsewhere (in the library or at home), so please do not come by expecting to find me outside office hours. That does not mean I am not happy to see you at any mutually convenient hour. Stop after class or call me for an appointment. If I’m not in when you phone, leave a message on my voice mail. I will return your call as soon as possible. I will accept no late essays (except in cases of documented medical emergency).

Office: HH 255
Hours: 10-11:15 TR, 2-4 TR, and by appointment