ENGLISH 251
The Practice and Theory of Criticism
Co-op Section
Syllabus for Fall, 1977

As its title indicates, this course is divided into two parts, a study of the theories of literature and a training in acquiring the practice of criticism. Hopefully by the end of the course the two parts will have begun to come together.

Theories of Literature and Literary Criticism

Various important theories about literature that have developed from the time of the ancient Greeks to the present day will be studied in three major blocks. Certain works of early and seminal thinkers will be examined in detail: those of the four major ancient theorists (Plato, Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus) and the work through which their ideas became implanted in English thought—Sidney's Apology for Poetry. We shall then examine various theories about certain major concepts concerning the process of creating and perceiving literature. We shall end the theoretic part of the course by considering various theories about fiction and drama that have not appeared in the works already examined.

The text for this part of the course is Criticism: The Major Statements, ed. Kaplan, from which principal passages will be assigned. Lecture-discussions on them will occur during the first hour of our meetings.

Three tests on the theories examined will be held in class, and another test, doubling as an essay, will be given in a take-home form.
Practical Criticism

During the second and third hours of each meeting we shall engage in practical criticism, looking first at poetry and approaching it from such topics as imagery and diction, structure and implication, and then examining the ways in which fiction and drama both resemble and differ from poetry. Texts for the poems will be distributed in photocopies; texts for fiction will be short stories selected from The Story, ed. Schorer (2nd ed.) and Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, ed. Kimbrough (Norton); the plays examined will be Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra, ed. Mack (Pelican Shakespeare) and Shaw’s Plays Pleasant (Penguin). Various critical terms, as found in Holman’s Handbook to Literature (Odyssey), will be discussed and applied throughout the course.

Typically a topic in practical criticism will be handled in three stages. First of all an illustrative text (poem, short story, or part of a play), which will have been read before class, will be examined in an oral discussion concerned with discovering what makes the text work and then with concluding how to go about writing a critique on it. Secondly, another, similar text will be assigned and half the class will, at home, write a critique of it, ranging from 1000 to 1500 words. These critiques will be submitted to the instructor and marked before the next meeting. In that meeting the critiques will be returned and the text examined, by all members of the class, in the light of the critiques already written. Thirdly, a further, similar text will be assigned to the other half of the class; they will write critiques which will be submitted and marked in the same way, and the text examined in class.

Each student is expected to participate in the oral discussions of texts and will submit a total of eight written critiques, each ranging from 1000 to 1500 words.