ENGLISH 251A

The Practice and Theory of Criticism

(emphasis on poetry and narrative)

Section 04

SYLLABUS for FALL, 1989

Description of the course

The calendar description of this course reads as follows: "The study and practice of skills needed for a close, analytical reading of literary texts and the writing of critical analyses on them; studies of theories concerning literature and literary criticisms."

Since English 251B is described as a "continuation" of 251A, how the two term courses relate to each other should be pointed out. English 251A will be given over to the development of skills required in the close reading of literary texts, emphasizing poetry and narrative. At the same time it will seek to help you to develop a core of critical terminology, vocabulary, and concepts. English 251B will apply these skills and concepts to the study of drama and will provide a study of literary theory, both ancient and current.

Structure of the course

In learning the skills of close reading, we shall first analyze how rhythm contributes to poetry and how literature works through implication. We shall then examine aspects of imagery, diction, structure, and implication in poetry. Then, after applying what has been learned about poetry to narrative fiction, we shall examine certain aspects of structuring incidents, characterization, and narrative voice in fiction. As we proceed from topic to topic, certain critical terms will be assigned for learning and application.

A second set of skills to be developed are those required for communicating, in a critique, what you have learned about how a particular piece of literature works. These skills include determining which points to develop and how, what kind of structure to use, and
how to express your argument. A considerable amount of practice is required before the skills become ingrained, and for this reason you will be expected to perform two kinds of exercise. In the first kind you will determine which points to develop and how, you will decide on how to organize them into a cohesive argument, and you will write, for your own eyes, a fairly detailed outline of the critique that would result from your planning. This outline you will not submit for marking, but you will be able to compare it with what is presented in the classroom discussion of how to write a critique on the subject of your mock exercise. In the other kind of exercise, you will add the actual composition of the paragraphs required and will submit the completed critique for marking.

Before each such exercise, mock or fully written, we shall examine in class a number of works of the kind on which you will perform the exercise, and with at least one of them we shall discuss how to go about making a critique of it. You will then perform the exercise on a fresh example, similar in kind but different in detail. Those fresh examples will then be examined in class, making use of the ideas expressed in critiques when those have been submitted.

For the critiques that you will submit for marking, the class will divide into groups, two groups (named Castor and Pollux) for poetry and three groups (named Red, White, and Blue) for narrative fiction. These groups will submit critiques on the subjects and at the dates noted in the last section of this syllabus.

In addition there will be two occasions on which you will be asked, in class, to write definitions of terms and to identify examples of them.

Summary of requirements

Your work will consist of the following:

- reading all the assigned texts
- taking part in the classroom discussion of the texts
- performing a number of mock exercises, of the kind described in the preceding section
- submitting two critiques, of 750 words each, on poetry and one critique, of 7000 words, on narrative fiction
- sitting for two classroom tests on critical terminology, vocabulary, and concepts.
Each of the critiques submitted will be worth 25% of the total grade, and the two tests together will be worth another 25%.

Texts assigned


Schedule of critiques and tests

Critiques are to be submitted to HH 263 by 5:00 p.m. on the days noted below (or submitted earlier to Illona Haus in HH 254). Tests will be written in the classroom.

Mon., Oct. 2. Castor group to submit critique on imagery (750 words).

Fri., Oct. 13. Pollux group to submit critique on diction (750 words).

Fri., Oct. 20. Castor group to submit critique on structure (750 words).

Fri., Oct. 27. Pollux group to submit critique on implication (750 words).

Mon., Oct. 30. Test on terminology concerning poetry.


Fri., Nov. 17. White group to submit critique on characterization in a short story (1000 words).

Fri., Nov. 24. Blue group to submit critique on narrative voice in a short story (1000 words).

Fri., Dec. 1. Test on terminology, vocabulary, and concepts concerning narrative fiction.