Slow Reading

(Literary Criticism: Practice)

Good reading is slow reading, not speed reading. Slow reading is the art of re-reading, of attending to detail, to nuance, to the subtle variations of tone, connotation, and implication inscribed on the surface of even short, declarative sentences: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." Slow reading is the experience of language in the details of its medium—words and sounds, figures of speech, elements of verse—rather than for a quick fix of information or sensation. In Nietzsche's words, it demands of us "to go aside, to take time, to become still." Neither a lyric poem nor a music video are slow, but—thanks to the VCR—both may be "read slowly,deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers."

In this seminar we will work together to learn to read slowly. We will do this by examining a number of poems and short stories. We will also examine some non-literary texts—including ads and videos—for the elements literature has in common with other signifying practices, even non-linguistic ones. In the past it was common for literary critics to want to cordon literature off from other kinds of writing and types of signification. But, in fact, the practice of slow reading inevitably leads us to consider the nature of meaning in general. Percy Shelley, the romantic writer, said that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. He meant that the metaphors they create exert a ghostly power over us in our ordinary talk. From this perspective, then, the techniques and vocabulary considered fundamental to the discipline of literary study—far from being merely an academic requirement—can also help us understand the figurations of everyday life.

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Office: Hagey Hall 254, X2416
Office hours: 2:30-4:30 Wednesday, or by appointment

Required Texts:
Scholes, et al., Text Book (St. Martin’s)
Holman and Harmon, A Handbook to Literature, 6th ed.
(Macmillan)
Reading Packet (available next week from Kinko’s)
Recommended Texts:

MLA Handbook


Assignments: attendance, active participation in seminar discussions and exercises, and a class presentation (30%); in-class essay (10%); 3 page paper (15%); 6 page paper (20%); and a final examination (25%). I will drop the final, and re-weight the remaining assignments, if our progress with the readings is clear—otherwise I will need the exam to indicate how you have been doing. Papers must be typed and double-spaced. A page is 250 words. Paper deadlines will be announced. Late papers may be penalized.

NOTE: Unlike a lecture course, a seminar gives you a chance to think for yourself, offer your own insights, and assess and comment on the ideas of others, without the constant influence of the instructor. Think of this class as a workshop in which you have the opportunity to contribute to the team effort at every meeting. Address yourself to all the participants, not just to me. My role, above all, will be to facilitate discussion and act as a resource person.