Reading Theory

SYLLABUS

I. The Death of the Author

Jan. 3 & 5: Introduction
Jakobson, "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles" (A)

Jan. 10 & 12: Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (A)
Wimsatt & Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" (A)

Jan. 17 & 19: Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (A) and "From Work to Text" (K)
Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (A)

II. Xerography and Typography

Jan. 24 & 26: Plato, Republic (selections in A)
Jan. 31 & Feb. 2: Aristotle, Poetics (A)
Feb. 7: Irigaray, "This Sex Which is Not One" and "When Our Lips Speak Together" (K)

III. Manufacturing Consent

Feb. 9: McLuhan, Understanding Media (selections in K)
Feb. 14 & 16: Chomsky, "Manufacturing Consent" (video)

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Feb. 28: Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (selections in A)


Mar. 7 & 9: Anderson, Imagined Communities (selections in K)
Spivak, Interview on The Satanic Verses (K)

IV. The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Mar. 14: Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste" (A)

Mar. 16 & 21: Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful

Mar. 23 & 28: Barthes, The Pleasures of the Text

Mar. 30: Bloom, "The Dialectics of Poetic Tradition" (A)
Tompkins, "But is it Any Good?: The Institution-alization of Literary Value" (K)
Reading Theory

(Literary Criticism: Theory)

Literary theory is speculation about literature. Historically, it has taken myriad forms. Literary theory may speculate about the nature of the beautiful; about the social role and value of art; about the nature of the object of study, i.e., the poem or novel; about the reactions of real or imagined readers; about the motives and means of the writer; about the relation between fiction and reality; about the relation between language and poetry; about the relation between a poem and its contents; and so on and on and on. In school, of course, and even at university, most of you will have been exposed to literary theory only indirectly, through training in how to read well. In fact, however, the best way to construe a text has long been the subject of debate, and there is even a technical term for speculation about interpretation—hermeneutics.

This course will not attempt systematically to cover even one of these areas of speculation, let alone to survey the entire field. Rather, in this seminar we will introduce ourselves to literary theory via a small number of topics. We will read speculative texts with the same sort of attention and care you have already learned to apply to works of literature. Literary theory can seem abstract and dryly philosophical to new readers, and it is difficult. But it is only as difficult as, say, a play by Shakespeare or a poem by Dickinson; and the pleasures of these texts, while different, are just as numerous. This is also why we will be reading original texts and in some cases books or parts of books—to do justice to the original ideas of these thinkers, of course, but also to do justice to what is exciting and challenging in their work as writers.

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One of the goals of this course is to teach you to read critically. This will involve learning new and perhaps strange ways to think about poetry and fiction, and a related new terminology. However, success at university depends not only on the ability to absorb new information, but also on the ability to ask questions. This course is required of all English majors and honours students because of the belief that what you learn about reading, writing, speaking, and thinking in this class will be
useful in the other English courses you take over the next two or three years. If this goal is to be realized, however, you must become an independent learner, able to use the reading and analytic strategies demonstrated in this course without continual prompting from the instructor. You must learn to prompt yourself.

That is why this class will function as a seminar. 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 hone your own reading skills at every meeting, as well as to contribute to the team reading effort. Address yourself to all the participants, not just to me. My role, after introducing new ideas and analytic tools, will be to facilitate discussion and act as a resource person.

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Readings:

Required Texts:
M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 6th ed. (HBJ)
Hazard Adams, Critical Theory Since Plato, Revised ed. (HBJ)
Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text (FSG)
Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (Oxford)
Kinko's Course Reader (available next week)

Recommended Texts:
Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory (Minnesota)
Joseph Gibaldi and Walter S. Achttert, MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 3rd ed. (MLA)

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Logistics:

Office: Magee Hall 257, X2416
Office hours: 2:30-3:30 Tuesday and Thursday, or by appointment
Assignments: Mandatory attendance and active participation in seminar discussions and exercises (20%); class presentation (10%); precis (10%); 4 page paper OR short quiz (your choice = 20%); and a final examination (40%).

The precis is due in class January 31 (250 words max.). For those that elect the 4 page paper, it is due in class on February 28; for those that elect the short quiz, it will be held in class on March 7. Papers must be typed and double-spaced; if using a word-processor, laser print and do not use right justification. A page is 250 words. Papers must follow the format for citation and quotation laid out in the MLA Handbook. Papers late without prior permission may be penalized 2% per day. Uncompleted assignments will be graded F-.

NOTE: Please keep a photocopy of any paper you submit, and never hand a paper in by sliding it under (or sticking it to) my office door.