

ENGLISH 303-01: CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LITERATURE (3 CR.)
Professor Christian Moraru
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“Theory is often a pugnacious critique of common-sense notions, and further, an attempt to show that what we take for granted as ‘common sense’ is in fact a historical construction, a particular theory that has come to seem so natural to us that we don’t even see it as a theory. As a critique of common sense and exploration of alternative conceptions, theory involves a questioning of the most basic premises or assumptions of literary study, the unsettling of anything that might have been taken for granted: What is meaning? What is an author? What is to read? What is the ‘I’ or the subject who writes, reads, or acts? How do texts relate to the circumstances in which they are produced?” (Jonathan Culler, Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction 4-5)

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND GENERAL GOALS: The course provides an introduction to the interpretation, analysis, and research of literature and culture. Specifically, this class will familiarize you with the fundamentals of literary and cultural criticism: its basic notions, terminologies, methods, tools, schools, and resources. We all are, in one way or another, readers of literature, enjoying it more or less “naturally” to varying degrees. In this course, we will move from “passive,” less reflective reading and enjoyment of literature—the “pre-critical” stage, as we will call it—to criticism or interpretation, that is, to understanding how literary-cultural discourse comes to be what it is, how it works, and, finally, how and why literature and culture move us. Thus, we will become aware of what literature and culture mean, how they do it, what this does to us, and how its effects depend on form and the cultural-historical context bearing on this form. Reading (of both primary texts and criticism/theory) as well as research, on which the course provides detailed instruction, and student work are geared toward these goals.

CONTENT, SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES, AND METHODS: We will explore and test out some of the major approaches in literary-cultural criticism, studying and trying our hands at various interpretation methods from the more traditional ones to the most innovative. Generally, the course will follow the “schools-and-movements” method of presentation. Remarkably diverse and more often than not based on seemingly mutually exclusive premises, interpretive methods can be confusing. To prevent this confusion, we will begin by organizing them—and by the same token our class—around a model of literary-cultural discourse understood as a particular form of communication. After all, literature

is a message in specific form, a text or discourse fragment somebody—a writer—communicates to somebody else, i.e., the reader.

Along these lines, we will sort out the fundamental components of any act of literary and cultural communication. As we will notice, some critical approaches address primarily certain elements such as the context of the text (the historical ambiance of literary production, for example), while others focus on the author (the message’s “sender”), or on the text itself (the message) and its style. Depending on what these approaches insist on, we should be able to differentiate among distinct interpretive models such as biographism, psychoanalysis, formalism and its various schools, structuralism and poststructuralism, the New Historicism, cultural and identity studies, and so on. These both dispute each other’s claims and share significant premises and concerns, which is why the distinctions among them are not always clear-cut. Nonetheless, by the end of the class we should know a) what they are, that is, how they work, and b) how to use them—where their limitations lie and how to step across them.

STRUCTURE: The course revolves around certain approaches to literature. To lay out the differences among them, we shall go beyond their “theoretical” study. Thus, we shall observe a number of critical models at work on a “target” text, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby. The critical handbook used in the course will help us see how the same work has generated a range of competing readings. Let me also point out that our discussion of Gatsby will not seek so much to touch on all aspects of this work as to develop particular interpretations by rehearsing specific methods of reading and becoming aware of the “theories” behind them. In addition, the course pursues overall a fairly straightforward chronology, tracing the modern history of critical theory and methodology from late 19th-century positivism to post-World War II recuperations of the formalist tradition and recent reactions against this tradition.

FORMAT: The course combines opening lectures by the instructor and discussion, with emphasis on the latter. It also requires group work—most exercises and applications will be done in groups—and research. Check our Blackboard site regularly for course handouts.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1. Class discussion, with primary focus on broader issues, and geared toward increasingly articulated personal contributions. Attendance and participation are expected and will factor in the final grade. Students’ active oral participation is critical. I expect you to come to class with your assignments completed, ready to ask questions, engage in discussion and group work. These activities require, besides preparation, civility, respect for others’ opinions, and willingness to learn from your peers even when you find yourself in disagreement with them.

2. Group work. All group members receive the same grade. Two types of group work will be involved:

a) Discussion. In-class. Group discussion (in groups of 6-9 members) with focus on particular material (readings for the day), on applications of various critical methods to certain literary works, etc. Groups debate a topic and then designate a student to report the findings to the rest of the class (reports of cca. 5-10 min. each). Group members take turns as presenters throughout the semesters.

b) Outside-of-class research followed by in-class critical exercises. Group members work together (in person or by e-mail) outside the class to a) identify appropriate research and b) start thinking about critical arguments pertaining to issues of interest (with Gatsby as a target text). In class, the groups finalize the arguments by incorporating research, then present the arguments to their peers (5-10-min. reports). Additional guidelines at our first meetings.

3. Midterm and final examination (in-class). There will be a midterm (75-min.) and a longer, final examination, both in-class. In all likelihood, the latter will be more comprehensive and consequently will carry more weight. We will prepare both carefully—the entire class is required to participate in the midterm and final review of the course, selection of topics, and rehearsals. We will talk about exam format in larger detail before the midterm. See the exam schedule in the syllabus below.

FINAL GRADE:

The final grade breakdown is as follows:

Class participation:	15%
Group work:	10%
Midterm:	35%
Final:	40%

CONFERENCES: Please meet with me during my office hours or make an appointment to discuss your work or the course. I encourage you to make at least one “formal” appointment.

COURSE POLICIES:

1. Late Work: No late work accepted. Please come to see me ahead of time if you foresee any deadline problems.
2. Plagiarism: Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of others’ materials both in form (wording) and substance (ideas). Any submission bearing your name signifies that you are the author, namely, that the words and the ideas are yours, with exceptions indicated by quotations marks and paraphrases. Evidence of plagiarism will result in one or more of the following: a failing grade for the assignment, an “F” for the whole course, and/or a report filed with the dean. Also, consult the UNCG policies on plagiarism.
3. Absences: You are allowed no more than 3 absences (which you must document) during the semester, for illnesses, religious holidays, and

emergencies preventing you from attending. Any absences beyond this number will affect your grade and may result in your being asked to drop the course. If you are the victim of an emergency or serious illness, please stay in touch with me by e-mail or phone. Do not hesitate to call me at my home number. And because tardiness disrupts class, too, be aware that coming in late 2 times counts as an absence.

GRADING: To pass, you must submit assigned work on time, come to class regularly, and participate in discussion.

REQUIRED READINGS:

1. David Lodge and Nigel Wood, eds. Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader. 3rd ed. New York: Longman, 2008.
2. Lois Tyson. Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2006.
3. Fitzgerald, F. Scott. The Great Gatsby. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995. ISBN 0684801523 or latest.

Note: Readings of lengthier primary texts discussed over a few classes are to be completed before the opening class in the sequence of meetings devoted to those texts. Plan ahead and make sure you finish longer readings in due time. “Assignments” are for the day they come under.

RECOMMENDED RESEARCH TOOLS: See Appendix to the syllabus.

COURSE SYLLABUS:

Week 1

W 01/20 Presentation of the course: goals, requirements, topics, and policies. Reading, writing, and research. Evaluation of student work; group work. Course syllabus and discussion. Our course’s materials and tools. Start reading The Great Gatsby (due 02/10).
>Scheduling the CITI workshops

Week 2

M 01/25 Library and Internet resources workshop 1 (Jackson Library; no readings for the day) SUBSECTION A. CITI (Mary Krautter). During class time.

W 01/27 Library and Internet resources workshop 1 (Jackson Library; no readings for the day) SUBSECTION B. CITI (Mary Krautter). During class time.

Week 3

M 02/01 Library and Internet resources workshop 2 (Jackson Library; no readings for the day) SUBSECTION A. CITI (Mary Krautter). During class time.

W 02/03 Library and Internet resources workshop 2 (Jackson Library; no readings for the day) SUBSECTION B. CITI (Mary Krautter). During class time.

Week 4

M 02/08

“Precritical” vs. “critical” reading. Interpretation and methodology: organizing critical models; literary and cultural criticism, history, and theory;
 Authors and authorship. Traditional or “humanist” criticism—historical and biographical criticism
 >Forming our discussion groups
 >GROUP PRESENTATION SIGNUP (Outside-of-class projects) (**OCP**)
 Assignments: Tyson 1-10

W 02/10

“Form” and the formalist reaction: close reading vs. structural linguistics-based interpretation
 From author to text—structure and structuralism
 Assignments: Saussure, in Lodge 42-50
 Assignments: Barthes, in Lodge 311-316
The Great Gatsby

Week 5

M 02/15

Structuralism (cont.)
 Assignment: Tyson 209-247
OCP on Gatsby and structuralism due
 * How to read Derrida (reading guidelines provided)

W 02/17

From “structure” to “deconstruction.” Structuralism vs. poststructuralism.
 Assignments: Derrida, in Lodge 210-224

Week 6

M 02/22

Deconstructing Gatsby
 Assignments: Tyson 249-280
OCP on Gatsby and deconstruction due

W 02/24

From text to reader. Reader-response criticism
 Assignments: Fish, in Lodge 382-400
 Preparing the midterm: topics, format, etc. (I)

Week 7

M 03/01

Preparing the midterm (II). Bring your blue book on Wed.

W 03/03

Midterm exam (in-class)

Week 8

>M 03/08

Spring Break; no class

>W 03/10

Spring Break, no class

Week 9

- M 03/15 Responding to Gatsby
 Assignments: Tyson 169-207
OCP on Gatsby and reader-response criticism due
- W 03/17 The unconscious and other concepts in psychoanalysis: Freud and
 Freudianism
 Assignments: Freud, in Lodge 51-69
- Week 10**
 M 03/22 Psychoanalyzing Gatsby
 Assignments: Tyson 11-52
OCP on Gatsby and psychoanalysis due
 *How to read Greenblatt (reading guidelines)
- W 03/24 From text to cultural discourse: “Old” and “New” Historicism;
 poststructuralism and the New Historicism
 Assignments: Greenblatt, in Lodge 555-571
- Week 11**
 M 03/29 Gatsby, cultural materialism, and the New Historicism
 Assignments: Tyson 281-315
OCP on Gatsby and the New Historicism due
- W 03/31 Cultural studies and identity analysis: Gender, sex, class, race, ethnicity.
 Gender studies, feminism
 Assignments: Woolf, in Lodge 81-92; Tyson 83-133
- Week 12**
 M 04/05 Gender and reading
 Assignment: Schweickart, in Lodge 484-505
OCP on Gatsby and feminism due
- W 04/07 Sexuality and representation
 Assignments: Sedgwick, in Lodge 506-530
- Week 13**
 M 04/12 Gatsby and queer studies
 Assignments: Tyson, 317-357
OCP on Gatsby and queer studies
- W 04/14 Empire and power: postcolonialism
 Assignment: Said, in Lodge 366-381
- Week 14**
 M 04/19 Postcolonial Gatsby?
 Assignments: Tyson 417-449
OCP on Gatsby and postcolonial analysis

W 04/21 Critical race studies
Assignments: Fanon, in Lodge 125-139; Tyson 359-415

Week 15

M 04/26 Gatsby and race
OCP on Gatsby and African American criticism

W 04/28 Preparing the final exam (I)

Week 16

Mon 05/03 Last meeting
Preparing the final exam (II)
Course overview
Final evaluations

FINAL EXAM: Wednesday, May 12, 3:30 – 6:30 PM, in-class. Bring your blue book.

Note: I would like to think of the syllabus as final. Nonetheless, your input is most welcome, and we may make some changes as we go on.

RECOMMENDED REFERENCE TOOLS:

I. Literary Histories; Companions and Literary Guides:

1. The Penguin History of Literature (English and American) (and The Penguin Bibliography), latest ed.
2. Cambridge Guide to Literature in English. Ian Ousby, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP; London: Hamlyn, 1993.
3. Emory Elliott, General Ed. Columbia Literary History of the United States. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.
4. Hart, James D. Oxford Companion to American Literature. Oxford, New York; Oxford UP, latest ed.

II. Handbooks, Dictionaries, Encyclopedias (Themes, Subjects, Terminology):

5. Harmon, William, Holman, Hugh C. A Handbook to Literature. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, latest ed.
6. Holman, Hugh C. A Handbook to Literature. New York: Macmillan; London: Collier: latest ed.

7. Wiener, Philip, P., ed. Dictionary of the History of Ideas. Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1973 (5 vol. + index).
8. Seigneuret, Jean-Charles., ed. Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs. New York: Greenwood P, 1988 (2 vol.)
9. Coyle, M., et al., eds. Encyclopedia of Literature Criticism. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.
10. Cuddon, J. A. A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory. 3rd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.
11. Benét's Reader's Encyclopedia. 4th ed. Bruce Murphy, ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.
12. Lentricchia, Frank, and McLaughlin, Thomas, eds. Critical Terms for Literary Study. 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.

III. Writing Tools:

13. Gibaldi, Joseph. MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers. Latest Edition. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2003.