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ENG 350: LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM

Course Description and Goals:

When I first began studying English as an undergraduate, I assumed that the primary formula for understanding the relations between literature, theory, and criticism went something like this: one **reads** literature; one **applies** theory to literature; and one **writes** criticism about literature. In this course, I hope that we can dynamite this formula together and reframe these three categories as overlapping domains. Can literature disclose something about a theoretical text (rather than the other way around)? Might there be a theoretical component to a purportedly critical text? What is at stake when the style of a theoretician verges on the literary? As a means to begin our approach to such daunting questions, I have organized this course into four units, each of which enjoins us to reorient our readerly relation to the literature-theory-criticism triad.

We will

1. consider how critics group theoretical texts according to open and yet very particular **problematics** (e.g., language, affect, sexuality, ideology, and so on);
2. work through a single **meta-critical** account of the relation between a single theorist and the domain of literary study;
3. study the entirety of a single **theoretical** text; and
4. immerse ourselves directly into a theoretically and critically rich **field** of study.

Additionally, we will spend quite a bit of time reading our texts in theory and criticism with and against two carefully chosen works of literature: Virginia Woolf's unfinished memoir "A Sketch of the Past" (1939-40) and Alan Hollinghurst's novel *The Line of Beauty* (2004). Each unit, then, aims to continue the training of a **readerly** capability to move between domains, affects, ideas, and concepts, cultivating a ready curiosity to explore a problem that might not have been sensed before. By the end of the semester, we will become more sophisticated students of literature who are better able to sense how literature thinks, how it moves, how it can contribute to a long history of ideas, and how it might even continue to alter those ideas and to elude our grasp.

Required Texts:

Theoretical and Critical Texts

Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*

Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*

Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*

Donald Hall and Annamarie Jagose, eds., *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*

Literary Texts

Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*

Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*

Grade Distribution and Description:

Engagement:	20%	Paper 1 (3-5 pages): 15%
Midterm Exam:	20%	Paper 2 (5-7 pages): 25%
Final Exam:	20%	

Engagement comprises several elements. It includes participation, preparedness, attention, and attendance. To earn full credit, I expect class members to bring assigned texts to class everyday along with a notebook and a pen or pencil. (It should go without saying that I also expect you *to use* these materials in class too.) My attendance policy is quite strict, since we only meet once a week. If you miss more than three class sessions, you will receive **no engagement credit**. If you continue to accrue absences, the penalty may be more severe.

Midterm and **final exams** will be “take home” assignments that ask you to work cumulatively with the course material. Each exam will mostly comprise short essay prompts: both analytical and reflective.

The **papers** require that you tease out and unfold the theoretical and/or critical implications of a connection or a conflict between ideas **[A]** within a single text or **[B]** across two texts. An “implication” in this context is a significant **problem, effect, or consequence** of an argument or a theme that is neither explicitly stated nor immediately obvious to readers. These papers do **not** ask you **to use** “theory” in order to explain the “literature.” Rather, they urge you to unpack and develop a reading of the theory itself with, against, or even in lieu of the literature.



SEMESTER SCHEDULE

INTRODUCTION

September 5: Derrida’s “Before the Law” and Brennan’s “Running and Dodging” (online)

UNIT 1—READING PROBLEMATICS

September 12: Culler’s *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (**entirety**)

September 19: Virginia Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past” (from *Moments of Being*, pp. 64-159)

UNIT 2—READING META-CRITICISM

September 26: Raymond Williams’ *Marxism and Literature* (pp. 1-74)

October 3: (cont.) Williams’ *Marxism and Literature* (pp. 75-212)

October 10: Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* (**entirety**)

UNIT 3—READING A THEORETICAL TEXT

October 17: Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (pp. 1-49);
Paper 1 Due

October 24: (cont.) Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (pp. 50-159)

October 31: Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past"

November 7: NO CLASS (Tuesday classes meet); **Take Home Mid-Term Still Due** (electronic submission)

UNIT 4—READING A FIELD

November 14: from *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*—Introduction, Sedgwick, Butler, Prosser, and Angelides (pp. xiv-xx, 3-73)

November 21: from *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*—Dean, Berlant and Warner, Grosz, Freeman, and Edelman (pp. 150-79, 194-211, 236-261, 287-98)

November 28: from *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*—Cvetkovich, Ahmed, McRuer, Puar, and Arondekar (pp. 373-97, 422-442, 488-97, 515-28, 547-57)

December 5: Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*; **Paper 2 Due**

LAST WEEKS

December 17:
Take Home Final Exam Due (electronic submission)

December 27:
Final Grades Will Be Calculated and Posted on E-Campus