Literary Matters: Signs, Systems, and Debate

Since Plato and Aristotle’s debate about art and Truth—does art lead us to Truth or distance us from it?—critics have wrestled with the role of art and the artist in society and the best approaches for reading literary and cultural “texts” (by texts I mean anything from Mrs. Dalloway to fraternity drinking rituals). In this course we will join the conversation by becoming versed in the histories, concepts and terminologies of several theoretical “schools”—marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, post-colonialism, post-structuralism. Besides reading theory we will rehearse using it as a tool for burrowing into the complexities of literature, culture, and self and for framing an argument with the results.

Learning Objectives:

• apply theoretical models in readings of texts for the purpose of building more complex, relevant arguments;
• integrate research into an analysis of texts.

Required Reading:
Coetzee, J. M. Disgrace (Penguin)
Forster, E.M. A Room with a View (Dover)
Hwang, David Henry. M. Butterfly
Marx and Engels. The Communist Manifesto (Verso Books)
Nealon, Jeffrey and Susan Searls Giroux. The Theory Toolbox
Shulman, Alex Kates. Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen
Readings on Blackboard

Grade Break-Down
Class facilitation 10%
Weekly responses 20%
Cultural Studies Project 40%
Research portfolio 10
Conference Presentation: 10
Polished research paper 20
Exams 30%
Course Responsibilities

**Participation:**
This course is designed to be informal and interactive and if it gets heated, all the better. I will prod, fill in gaps, and facilitate, but I will not lecture. You must do the reading, write your weekly responses and come prepared to discuss ideas and enter into debate. One of the functions of theory is to raise questions that provoke discomfort, anger, pleasure, so pay attention to these emotional reactions and come prepared to talk about them.

**Attendance:**
While I don’t want anyone to be absent ever, I will allow you two absences without penalty. After that, each absence will result in a two-point deduction in your final average.

**Discussion facilitation:**
The main purpose of this assignment is to practice the application of theory in student-led discussion. Small groups of students (2-3) will prepare a session of approximately 30 minutes that makes sense of and relevant a significant theoretical concept from the readings for that day. Your grade will be based on your ability to get the class involved; the content of your presentation—accuracy, clarity, organization; the division of labor within your group (does everyone carry an equal load?); and the originality of your work (best manifested by relevant application to literature and/or culture).

Note that facilitators will need to meet with me by Friday before your presentation to let me know generally what you're planning to do. That means that you will need to get together before meeting with me to decide what you're doing. On the class day immediately following your presentation each group member will turn in an overview that includes 1) summary of the theory discussed and its relevance to literature/culture 2) a description of the division of labor—who did what? 3) the primary teaching point of the facilitation and 4) a list of works consulted as you prepared for the facilitation.

**Monday Responses:**
On most Mondays you will turn in a one-page, double-spaced response to the readings for that day. Some of these will be prompted, others not. Your task is to discipline the readings—many of which are difficult and require re-readings—by determining the essence of the argument—what in the heck is this writer saying??—but also how this particular critical/theoretic approach affects you personally or culture generally. Rather than reiterating what has already been said in class, add your own perspective or insight and use the reaction piece to practice using theory as an analytical tool. Since these reaction papers are intended to help you prepare for class discussion, they are due at the beginning of each class period and will not be accepted late or without your presence in class that day.

**Two Take-Home Examinations:** (30 points, 15 each) Prompts will be handed out one week before the exam is due.
Research Project: Reading Signs in Popular Culture (40 points)

For your final project you will use a theoretical model to frame an argument about a icon or text circulating in American popular culture. The key here is to choose a theory that works for you and an icon that interests you, for whatever reason. Some random examples are: Elvis, Gwen Stefani, the polo icon, the peace sign, Gucci, mosh pits, facebook, Madmen, bungee jumping, spring break, graphic novels, cheerleading, the Simpsons, apple pie. In other words, you can work with anything or anybody that is widely and uncritically admired, ridiculed, or detested. Oftentimes, how a culture responds to popular phenomenon or how the phenomenon originates is symptomatic of fears or excitements suppressed in social/political circles; by “reading” a popular icon, you’ll be “reading” American culture. This project requires outside research to help you gain a deeper understanding of your theoretical approach and your topic of study. You will be expected to consult at least 10 scholarly sources and use seven of them in your paper. You will present a condensed version of your work at our “American Icons and Ideology Conference” on the last four days of class. Your finished research paper (10 pages) will be due on the scheduled date of the final.

The grade for this project is broken down into several components: a research journal (10%) a presentation of research at the American Icons and Ideology Conference (10%), and a polished paper (20%).

- Research Journal/Portfolio: To begin work on this project, I’m offering the following prompts, to be turned in separately on the dates listed. Please collect each prompt in a portfolio and turn it in on Nov. 19, along with a cover letter:
  - Identify your research question: what would you like to find out and why do you care? How is your topic relevant to American culture? What kind of research will you conduct? What is your time line? What is your working claim?
  - Write a 2 – 3 page semiotic analysis of your “text” (ie., your chosen American icon): what are some of the ideas, suggestions, meanings, issues imbedded/present in your text? In order to get beyond a surface reading of your “text” you’ll need to familiarize yourself with its social, historical, political, religious context. Feel free to recycle this analysis as needed in your final paper.
  - Research overview: what have you learned from your outside research/reading? How does it add to or alter your semiotic analysis? Submit a complete annotated bibliography with this exercise.
  - Theoretical framing: what concepts from your theoretical model are relevant to your study. How will you apply the theory to the text? What does your theoretical approach allow you to see about your text?
  - Portfolio cover letter: How is this portfolio a reflection of your learning about literature/culture and theory?

- American Icons and Ideology Conference: Research and publication is a large component of academic life. One way to work out ideas before submitting articles to journals is to give paper readings at professional conferences. Audiences can
help presenters advance their arguments or identify useful secondary and primary works by asking questions and providing information during the Q&A portion of the conference. We will conduct an abbreviated version of a conference on the last two weeks of class, with each of you assigned to a panel and collectively presenting your papers to class, followed by questions raised from the audience. The conference is meant to help you refine the argument of your research project and turn it into the required 10 pages due on the date of the scheduled final.

LATE POLICY
Late work will not be accepted unless an extension has been arranged with me ahead of the due date.

GRADING
90-100 pts A
80-89 pts B
70-79 pts C
60-69 pts D

Additional Information:

Academic Advising: It is imperative that all students visit regularly with an academic adviser. Each college within the university has an academic advising center, staffed by full-time, professional advisers to assist students with course selection, degree plans, and other academic matters. To find out how to contact the right adviser, go to: http://www.tamucc.edu/academics/advising.php

Students who have yet to declare a major are advised by the Academic Advising Transition Center. For more information, go to: http://www.tamucc.edu/~aac

The College of Liberal Arts requires that students meet with an Academic Advisor as soon as they are ready to declare a major. The Academic Advisor will set up a degree plan, which must be signed by the student, a faculty mentor, and the department chair. The College's Academic Advising Center is located in Driftwood 203E, and can be reached at 825-3466.

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism, “the presentation of work of another as one’s own work,” is only one form of academic dishonesty. Plagiarism also includes falsification (the intentional alteration of information), fabrication (the intentional invention of information), multiple submission (using the same material for two separate assignments or courses without permission from the instructors), and abuse of academic materials (the intentional destruction of resource materials.) Sometimes students commit unintentional plagiarism (by not citing sources properly, for example) because they are unaware of the standards that apply. Because plagiarism is such a dirty word on college campuses, please see me if you have a question about violations, however minor.
**Disabilities Accommodations:** The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please call or visit Disability Services at (361) 825-5816 in Corpus Christi Hall 116.

If you are a returning veteran and are experiencing cognitive and/or physical access issues in the classroom or on campus, please contact the Disability Services office for assistance at (361) 825-5816.

**Grade Appeal Process**

As stated in University Rule 13.02.99.C2.01, Student Grade Appeal Procedures, a student who believes that his or her final grade reflects academic evaluation which is arbitrary, prejudiced, or inappropriate in view of the standards and procedures outlined in the class syllabus, may appeal the grade given for the course. The burden of proof is upon the student to demonstrate the appropriateness of the appeal. For complete details, including the responsibilities of the parties involved in the process and the number of days allowed for completing the steps in the process, see the University Rule 13.02.99.C2.01, in the University Handbook for Rules & Procedures: http://academicaffairs.tamucc.edu/Rules_Procedures/

**REMINDER TO ENGLISH MAJORS:** As part of the English undergraduate capstone course (ENGL 4351), all English majors are required to submit a portfolio of writings in different discourse genres that they have completed for their college classes. To help you prepare for this assignment, you should keep a copy of all essays, research papers, literary analyses, creative and report writing, etc., so that you will have an ample selection from which to choose when the portfolio comes due.

**Readings and Class Schedule:** (asterisked readings can be found on blackboard. I expect you to print them out, [re]read them, and bring them with you to class. Not having your readings in class “signifies” to me a lack of commitment to learning.

**Wed. Aug 27:** Class introductions

**Authority:** *Whose Got it and How?*

**Mon. Sept 1:** Labor day, no class.

**Wed. Sept 3:** * readings from Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Poetics* Toolbox, chap 1 (Why Theory?) and chap 2 (Authority)

**Mon. Sept 8:** * Wordsworth’s preface to Lyrical Ballads, T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent”*
Toolbox, chap 4 (Subjectivity)
Response 1 due

**Ideology and Literature**

Wed. Sept 10:  * Forster’s “Flat and Round Characters”
A Room with a View

Mon. Sept 15:  A Room with a View (to end)
Group Presentation (New Criticism)
Response 2 due

Wed. Sept 17:  Marx and Engel’s *Communist Manifesto*

Mon. Sept 22:  Marx, to end
*Eagleton’s “Marxism and literary criticism”*
Response 3 due

Wed. Sept 24:  Class and ideology
*Toolbox, chap 6: Ideology*
Group Presentation

**Frames to Read By…or not**

Mon. Sept 29:  Civilizations and its Discontents, chaps 1, 2, 3, 4
Response #4 due

Wed. Oct. 1:  Civilization and its Discontents, chaps 5 to end
Group Presentation

Mon. Oct 6:  Barthes “Death of the Author”
Holland’s “Hamlet, my Greatest Creation”
*Toolbox, chap 3: Reading*
Reading Response #5
Group Presentation

**Literature and Identity Politics: Gender, Race, Sexuality**

Wed. Oct 8:  *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*
Millet, *Sexual Politics* (reader)
Exam 1 due

Fetterley’s “Resistant reader”
Group Presentation
Response 6 due

Wed. Oct. 15: *Memoirs*
  * Masculinity Studies (R. W. Connell)
  Group presentation

  * Wallace’s “Invisibility Blues”
  Response 7 due
  Group Presentation

Wed. Oct. 22: *M. Butterfly*
  Toolbox, chap 10 (Differences)
  Group presentation
  Research portfolio 1 due

Mon. Oct 27: *M. Butterfly*
  Sedgwick, from *Between Men* (reader)

*Cultural Studies and “Posts”*

Wed. Oct 29: *“American Icons”*
  * “Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (Adorno and Horkeimer)
  * Toolbox, Chap 5 (Culture)
  Research portfolio 1 due (proposal)
  Group Presentation

Mon. Nov. 3: Toolbox, Chap 9: Posts
  Research Portfolio 2 due (semiotic analysis)
  Conferences with Engelhardt, no formal class

Wed. Nov. 5: Disgrace
  Exam #2 due

Mon. Nov. 10: Disgrace
  Research Portfolio 3 due (summary of findings, annotated bib)

Wed. Nov. 12: Disgrace
  Research portfolio 4 due (theoretical framing)

Mon. Nov. 17: Pop Culture Conference
  Panels 1 & 2
  Research portfolio due (all parts with cover letter)
Wed. Nov. 19: Pop Culture Conference
   Panels 3 & 4

Mon. Nov. 24: Pop Culture conference
   Panels 5 & 6

Wed. Nov 26: Thanksgiving Break, no class

Mon. Dec. 1 Pop Culture Conference
   Panels 7 & 8

Mon. Dec. 8: Research project due