

Reading Politics

Instructor: Donnelly

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Office Hours:

Tutorial Description: This course explores how works of literature contain political arguments and the methods literary critics use to make political arguments about literature so that you can write about the politics of literature in your Junior Essay.

Not a course on polemics or political essays, the course asks how elements of literature—narrative, character, meter, verse form—create political meaning and make political arguments. Crucial to the argument of the course is the idea that literary study is a unique discipline within cultural studies and one that brings unique methodologies and frameworks to questions of politics.

The course is divided into three parts:

1. How is literature political and what does it mean for literature to have political content?

We will begin with three literary political allegories, “Rip Van Winkle,” *Benito Cereno*, and *The Heroic Slave*, and read them alongside a foundational text of Marxist criticism, Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*. By juxtaposing a literary criticism that seeks to explicate the political allegories of texts with literary texts that are intentional literary allegories, we will try to establish a mode of ‘political reading’ for the tutorial.

2. How does literature enable the formation of group identities in political arenas?

We will look at how literature forms several political groups. Beginning with Austen’s *Emma*, we will examine the novel’s role in imagining citizens of a nation-state and then, with some poems from Yeats, citizens of an empire. Then, through Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* we will explore literary formations of class identities and class politics. Finally, in the next two weeks, we will look at two different formations of racialized identities, first American ethnic nationalism in *The Great Gatsby* and, second, race as a literary category in our current moment with Rankin’s *Citizen*. The texts for these weeks proceed chronologically allowing us to track the development of these group formations through subsequent weeks.

3. How does literature comment both in support and as critical of the State?

Turning to detective fiction, Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express* and an episode from *The Wire*, we will interrogate fiction’s service to the disciplinary functions of the State. Then, we will spend two weeks thinking about the relationship between literature and the law. First, self-contained parts of two eighteenth-century novels, *Tom Jones* and *Tristram Shandy*, that begin the history of the novel by imagining readers as juries and novels as exercises in jurisprudence. Second, a literary criticism of US property law and its relationship to slavery through two stories from Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*, “Was” and “Delta Autumn.” And finally, we will look at literature’s commentary on the State, where that commentary seems least obvious, the children’s novel series *Harry Potter*.

Most importantly, during this course, you will be writing a critical essay on a text or several texts of your choice, employing the frameworks we are studying. Beginning in the fourth week, we will spend at least 1/3 of each class session workshopping writing from students in the tutorial. Looking ahead, this course strives to be the best preparation for a critical honors thesis.

Tutorial Goals:

General Goals

To introduce the discipline and practice of English literary studies at an upper-division level, & to write 20-25pp research paper in preparation for an honors thesis. You will be able to:

- Design a research question
- Develop a critical bibliography around that question, including diverse methods and viewpoints
- Put secondary criticism in conversation with a your own ideas and with other criticism
- Write with greater clarity and precision

Course-Specific Goals

To write a junior paper in literary criticism that engages in a political discussion. To introduce students to a range of methodologies on which to model that literary criticism. In particular, you will be able to:

- Discuss works of literature as political arguments, both as allegory and through interpretation of underlying ideologies.
- Participate in ongoing scholarly, academic, and popular debates about literature and literary criticism.
- Employ specific elements of literary thinking such as narratology and discourse analysis to make critical arguments about works of literature.

Assignments:

5-7 Page Short Paper (Week 4, 10%): An extended close reading of a primary text, or one that applies a close-read critical model to a close-read literary text; this will be followed by an individual student conference to discuss the paper.

Draft Prospectus (Week 8, 10%): two page prospectus of the project that you will be working on this semester.

Revised Prospectus & Annotated Bibliography (Week 9, 20%) An annotated bibliography of 8-10 sources should accompany the revised prospectus. The bibliography should reproduce in a few sentences the main argument of the work you intend to make use of. It should also include, in a few sentences, how you plan on engaging with the thesis of the work you have summarized.

Participation & Preparation (20%): A small seminar like this one depends on the active participation of all of its members. Each week you will have an article to summarize for the whole group. You are responsible for reading all of the articles so that you can engage in discussion and knowing your article well so that you can lead discussion. Finally, you will be responsible for a 5 minute presentation on your research at the end of the semester.

Final Paper (Reading Period, 40%): An 20-25 page paper on a literary work not read for this course. This paper must engage with the frameworks and methodologies of the course.

Schedule:

PART 1: HOW IS LITERATURE POLITICAL?

1) Waking the Political Unconscious

Irving, "Rip Van Winkle"

Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, "Preface," 9-14; "Magical Narratives," 103-150

2) Literature as Political Allegory

Melville, *Benito Cereno*

Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*

3) Literary Criticism as Political Allegory

Continue with "Rip Van Winkle," *Benito Cereno*, and *The Heroic Slave*

Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, "On Interpretation," 17, 74-102

Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, "Authors," 192-199

5-6 Page Short Paper Due

General Meeting #1: Tutorial Program Welcome and Overview

PART 2: THE FORMATION OF POLITICAL GROUPS THROUGH LITERATURE

4) Forming National Identities

Austen, *Emma* (Bk I & II)

Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, "Introduction," 1-9.

Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Introduction, 3-27; "The Self Contained: Emma," 138-160.

5) Forming Imperial Identities

Austen, *Emma* (Bk III)

Yeats, "The Circus Animals' Desertion," "Easter 1916," "The Second Coming," "Sailing to Byzantium," & "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen."

Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, "Introduction," ix-xxvii; "Jane Austen and Empire," 80-97; "Yeats and Decolonization," 230-238.

6) Forming Class Identities

Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*

Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, "Between History and Literature," 12-15; "A Working Master," 25-65.

Draft Prospectus Due

General Meeting #2: Introduction to Critical Methods

7) Forming Ethnic Nationalist Identities

Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Michaels, *Our America*, "Land of the Kike, Home of the Wop" 1-15; "The Rising Tide," "The Vanishing American," and "A Family Matter" 23-51.

Tentative Library Visit

8) Forming Racial Identities

Rankin, *Citizen*

Suggs, *Whispered Consolations*, "Signifying, Epistemology, and Ontology in Law and African American Narrative; or, A House of Laws on Fire," 1-18; "The Reemergence of Desire and the Postclassical Narrative," 285-324.

PART 3: LITERATURE FOR AND AGAINST THE STATE

9) The Police State

Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*

The Wire, “Old Cases”

Miller, D.A., *The Novel and the Police*, “Foreword: ‘But Officer . . . ’” vii-xv; “The Novel and the Police,” 1-32.

Draft Annotated Bibliography

10) Law and Literature 1: Readers as Juries

Fielding, *Tom Jones*, Book III

Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, Volume I

Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, “Realism and the Novel Form: II,” 31-34.

Prospectus + Annotated Bibliography Due

General Meeting #3: Seniors Tell All

11) Law and Literature 2: Readers as Judges

Faulkner, “Was” & “Delta Autumn”

Davis, *Games of Property*, “Conclusion: Game of Compensation,” 223-261.

12) Literature vs. Big Government

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, “VII. The Ministry of Magic,” “VIII. The Hearing,” “XII. Professor Umbridge,” “XIII. Detention with Dolores,” “XVII. Educational Decree Number Twenty-Four,” “XVIII. Dumbledore’s Army,” XXII. St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries,” & “XXIII. Christmas on the Closed Ward.”

Robbin, Bruce, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good*, “The Fairy Godmother” & “How to Be a Benefactor without Any Money”

Draft of Junior Essay Due

13) Writing Literature as Political Action

Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, “Concluding Remarks”

Nobel Prize Speeches: Faulkner (1950), Steinbeck (1962), Morrison (1993), Dylan (2016)

5-minute Presentation Due

Final Essay Due

Required Texts:

Austen, *Emma*

Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*

Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*

Melville, *Benito Cereno*

Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*

Texts on Canvas:

Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, “Introduction,” 1-9.

Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Introduction, 3-27; “The Self Contained: Emma,” 138-160.

Davis, *Games of Property*, “Conclusion: Game of Compensation,” 223-261.

Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, “Delta Autumn,” 319-348.

Irving, “Rip Van Winkle”

- Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, “Preface,” 9-14; “On Interpretation,” 17, 74-102; “Magical Narratives,” 103-150.
- Michaels, *Our America*, “Land of the Kike, Home of the Wop” 1-15; “The Rising Tide,” 23-29.
- Miller, D.A., *The Novel and the Police*, “Foreword: ‘But Officer..,’” vii-xv; “The Novel and the Police,” 1-32.
- Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, “Between History and Literature,” 12-15; “A Working Master,” 25-65.
- Nobel Prize Speeches: Faulkner (1950), Steinbeck (1962), Morrison (1993), Dylan (2016)
- Robbin, Bruce, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good*, “The Fairy Godmother” & “How to Be a Benefactor without Any Money”
- Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, “VII. The Ministry of Magic,” “VIII. The Hearing,” “XII. Professor Umbridge,” “XIII. Detention with Dolores,” “XVII. Educational Decree Number Twenty-Four,” “XVIII. Dumbledore’s Army,” XXII. St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries,” & “XXIII. Christmas on the Closed Ward.”
- Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, “Introduction,” ix-xxvii; “Jane Austen and Empire,” 80-97; “Yeats and Decolonization,” 230-238.
- Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, “Concluding Remarks”
- The Wire*, “Old Cases”
- Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, “Realism and the Novel Form: II,” 31-34.
- Yeats, “Among School Children,” “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” “Easter 1916,” “Ego Dominus Tuus,” “The Fisherman,” “The Second Coming,” “Sailing to Byzantium,” “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” & “Leda and the Swan.”

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism is the use of another person’s ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. Consequences of plagiarism can range from failure on the paper to dismissal from the course to even more serious actions. You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with Harvard FAS’s Honor Code: “*Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one’s own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.*”

Collaboration: You are absolutely encouraged to talk with other students about the course and its readings, and to read each others’ work. In individual assignments (which may include midterm or term papers, short writing assignments, homework or reading questions and responses, or take-home exams), academic collaboration and external sources should be always cited.

Attendance: Your attendance in tutorial is vital to your own success as well as to the success of the class as a whole; so is your attendance in Junior Tutorial General Meetings and at other required events. I will allow each student a “free” tutorial absence to be used in case of sickness, travel, etc: no explanation necessary. Missing more than one class will decrease your participation grade, and excessive absence could result in failing the course. Also, being late really disrupts the work we’re doing together: 2 tardies = 1 absence. If you have attenuating circumstances, you must communicate with me in a timely manner so that we can discuss how to deal with it.

Due Dates & Late Grades: Unless otherwise specified, assignments are due by 11:59pm on the date listed in the schedule. Late assignments will be docked 1/3 letter grade per day late, except for the

final paper, which must be turned in before the due date. Students failing to turn in a final paper, or turning it in late without an official excuse, will fail the tutorial. If, well in advance of an assignment, you expect you will need an extension, please talk with me.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: *“Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.”*