

ENGL 6070/RELS 6671
LITERARY THEORY
Mon., 6:30-9:15
Macy 110

Kent L. Brintnall

kbrintna@uncc.edu

Office Hours: Tue., 2:00-3:00, and by appointment, Macy 202A

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What is literature? What is it *for*? What is its relationship to politics, ethics, “reality”? These questions have plagued literary theorists in the West since Plato condemned poets as threats to the *polis*. This course will explore how these questions were posed and answered by a select group of French literary theorists, often identified as “post-structuralist,” in the wake of Aushwitz, Hiroshima, Stalinism, the Cold War and Third World liberation struggles, and in conversation with structural linguistics, psychoanalysis and Marxist theory. This course does not intend to be an exhaustive, or even representative, overview of modern literary theory. Instead, it focuses on a handful of major works written in France after World War II that investigate the nature and function of literature. It highlights approaches that emphasize the unique formal features of literary language, their disruptive effect on the reader’s subjectivity and their subversive political and social consequences. Unlike more expansive surveys, it focuses on entire works by key authors.

While the readings in this course will be challenging, they are among the most influential theoretical writings of the late twentieth century. They also raise some of the most provocative questions about the nature and function of literary language, the practice of reading and writing, and the political work of representation. In our media and violence saturated age, we would do well to think about the ways that aesthetic representation can support and subvert power.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974 [1970]).

Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988 [1943]).

Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 [1967]).

Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984 [1974]).

Additional readings will be made available on electronic reserve.

Please bring all relevant readings to class.

RECOMMENDED TEXTS

Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 3rd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009)

Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008)

Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman, *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2d ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005)

Lawrence D. Kritzman, *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006)

Irena R. Makaryk, ed., *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1993)

GENERAL RESPONSIBILITY

To succeed in this course, you must be proactive. This includes both doing the work outlined in the syllabus and taking initiative if problems arise. If you do not understand the material or my expectations, if life is impinging on you in some way, or if my teaching style is not working for you, please let me know. I will do what I can to help, but I am completely unable to remedy the situation if I do not know there is a problem.

I want every student to succeed in this class. In selecting readings, crafting assignments, setting a schedule and articulating expectations, I have tried to create a framework that will enable this. In presenting material and responding to assignments, I strive to be clear. I will not, however, hunt you down, or pester you, to make sure you are doing the required work.

SPECIFIC EXPECTATIONS

You are expected to (1) attend, and be on time for, all class meetings; (2) read carefully all assigned readings prior to the class session for which they are assigned; (3) participate actively and productively in class discussions; (4) be familiar with the syllabus; (5) take responsibility for fulfilling the requirements of the course; and (6) check your 49er Express e-mail accounts regularly for course announcements and personal communications from the instructor.

You are **NOT** expected to agree with the views espoused by the instructor, the course materials or other students; you are expected to manage any disagreement respectfully and productively.

CLASS PREPARATION

In this course, we will engage in close, critical readings of the relevant texts. You should read carefully prior to class so that we can spend our time in class on specific passages, problems, or questions. While reading for class, you should take note of the issues and questions you want to bring to our collective discussion.

You should make sure, at a minimum, that you can summarize the author's main points, the evidence marshaled to support that point, the chief rhetorical strategies employed and any notable short-comings in the analysis. You should also make sure that you have mastered any unfamiliar vocabulary and have investigated the relevant history, cultural and intellectual background.

In order to facilitate class discussion, each student should come to class having identified 3-4 passages from the week's reading that struck them as particularly interesting, troubling, puzzling or generative. You should be prepared to discuss your reasons for selecting these passages and to guide your classmates through a consideration of the passage in relation both to the readings as a whole and the themes and questions of the course. ***All members of the class, students and instructor alike, are responsible for understanding, explaining, analyzing and teaching the material under discussion.***

Our class meetings are an opportunity to deepen your understanding of, ask questions of, and develop ideas about the readings. We will not have time to discuss fully all of the assigned reading during our time together, but our collective consideration should enhance your ability to engage the materials more carefully and thoughtfully on your own. Your writing is the opportunity to demonstrate this engagement.

ATTENDANCE

As a graduate student, school should be your first priority. This means you should attend and be on time for all class meetings. Because life does not always accommodate our priorities, you will be given one excused absence for the semester. ***Every absence after that, for whatever reason, will result in a full letter deduction from your final grade for the course. Any two instances of arriving late or leaving early will count as an absence.*** If you are absent from class, you are responsible for getting any announcements, lecture notes, handouts or assignments.

The exception to this rule is absences necessitated by religious observance. You may miss two classes for religious observance, but you must provide me with written notice (which includes e-mail correspondence) of the classes you will be missing for this reason no later than **Monday, January 24.**

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

Consistent with the University's commitment to inclusivity, I pledge to do my best to run the class in a manner that is respectful of difference, including but not limited to, physical and mental ability, age, socio-economic status, religious identity, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality and veteran status. You are expected to be respectful of these differences in your conduct in class and on campus.

As future members of the academy, you should begin writing in a way that recognizes diversity. In other words, you should strive, at the very least, to use gender-inclusive language and also to be mindful of metaphors that may have problematic racial, ethnic, class, sexual or (dis)ability connotations.

ACCOMMODATION OF DISABILITIES

If you have a disability that qualifies you for accommodations, please provide a letter from Disability Services at the beginning of the semester. For more information regarding accommodations, please contact the Office of Disability Services (www.ds.uncc.edu).

E-MAIL COMMUNICATION

I will communicate with you as a class and as individuals using the 49er Express e-mail system. You are responsible for checking this e-mail account regularly and responding promptly to any e-mail requests.

CLASS DECORUM

(1) Be on time for class. If you must arrive late or leave early, please do so as unobtrusively as possible. (2) Cell phones must be turned off prior to class. If your cell phone rings, or I observe you text-messaging during class, it will result in a full letter deduction in your grade for the course. (3) Computers may only be used to take notes during class. If I observe you using your computer for any other purpose, it will result in a full letter deduction in your grade for the course.

SCHEDULE

1.10 Introduction/Overview

1.17 MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY – No Class

1.24 Georges Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” in *Visions of Excess*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985 [1933]), 116-29 (electronic reserve)

Georges Bataille, “From the Stone Age to Jacques Prévert,” in *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, trans. Michael Richardson (New York: Verso, 1994 [1946]), 137-54 (electronic reserve)

Bataille, *Inner Experience*, ix-61

1.31 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 65-157

2.7 Maurice Blanchot, “How is Literature Possible?” in *Faux Pas*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971 [1943]), 76-84 (electronic reserve)

Maurice Blanchot, “Literature and the Right to Death,” in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Lydia Davis (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995 [1948]), 300-44 (electronic reserve)

Maurice Blanchot, “The Essential Solitude,” in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982 [1955]), 19-34 (electronic reserve)

****Analytical Essay due* (Bataille)

2.14 Georges Bataille, “Friends,” in *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone (San Francisco: Lapis Press, 1988 [1939-40]), 11-48 (electronic reserve)

Maurice Blanchot, “The Negative Community,” in *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988 [1983]), 1-26 (electronic reserve)

Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Inoperative Community,” in *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991 [1986]), 1-42 (electronic reserve)

- 2.21** Roland Barthes, “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989 [1966]), 11-21 (electronic reserve)
- Roland Barthes, “From Science to Literature,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989 [1967]), 3-10 (electronic reserve)
- Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977 [1968]), 142-48 (electronic reserve)
- Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977 [1971]), 155-64 (electronic reserve)

****Analytical Essay due* (Blanchot)

- 2.28** Barthes, *S/Z*, ix-107
But first read “Sarrasine,” pp. 221-54

3.7 SPRING BREAK – No Class

- 3.14** Barthes, *S/Z*, 106-217

3.21 TATE LECTURE – No Class

Religious Studies graduate students are expected to attend this lecture.

****Analytical Essay due* (Barthes)

- 3.28** Julia Kristeva, “How Does One Speak to Literature?,” in *Desire in Language*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980 [1971]), 92-123 (electronic reserve)
- Julia Kristeva, “Bataille, Experience and Practice,” in *On Bataille: Critical Essays*, ed. and trans. Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995 [1972]), 237-65 (electronic reserve)
- Julia Kristeva, “The Subject in Process,” in *The Tel Quel Reader*, trans. Patrick ffrench and Roland-François Lack (New York: Routledge, 1998 [1973]), 133-78 (electronic reserve)

- 4.4** Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, vii-106

- 4.11** Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 107-234

- 4.18** Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978 [1966]), 278-94 (electronic reserve)
- Jacques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978 [1967]), 251-77 (electronic reserve)
- Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982 [1968]), 3-27 (electronic reserve)

****Analytical Essay due* (Kristeva)

- 4.25** Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, ix-93
- 5.2** Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 95-164, 269-316
- 5.9** *Analytical Essay due* (Derrida)
- 5.13** *Final Papers due, by noon.*

ASSIGNMENTS

You must submit all assignments by e-mail (kbrintna@uncc.edu). If I am unable to open your attachment, and you do not submit a readable version within 24 hours of my notification of the problem, the paper will be graded at my discretion. All assignments must be double-spaced, in a 12-point font, with one-inch margins and no extra spaces between paragraphs. *No late papers will be accepted.*

Analytic Essays (40%; 10% each)

You must write **four (4)**, 4-6 page analytic essays. They are due by 5PM on **February 7, February 21, March 21, April 18** and **May 9**, respectively. These essays may focus on a single reading, connect readings from a given week, or connect readings from different authors across the course. For the analytic essays, you are not expected to consult materials outside of the course. These essays must develop an argument, insight, or critique that is yours in relation to the materials of the course. These essays may explain the value of an author's idea(s), rely on an author's ideas to interpret a "text" (broadly construed), express disagreement with an author, or modify an author's approach to defend it from criticism.

Final Paper (60%)

You must write a 15-20 page paper that engages the themes of the course. This paper is due on **May 13, by noon**. Like the analytic essays, it should develop an argument, insight or critique in relation to the materials, themes and questions of the course. The length of this paper, and its placement at the end of the semester, however, signals that you should consider both a question of greater complexity and significance and materials of greater breadth than the analytical essays. For the final paper, you are expected to consult materials in addition to those read for class and you will be graded on both the scope of materials considered. Ideally, you will select one author from the course and read as widely as possible in their corpus to frame your discussion. The paper may focus on one author, place authors in conversation, or consider a "text" (broadly construed) in light of ideas from the course.

GRADING

In grading your assignments, I will use the following criteria:

- (1) Is the work satisfactory as an *expository* exercise? Does it accurately characterize the material under consideration? Does it select the most relevant and important ideas from the materials in relation to the student's central claim(s)? Does it offer a sympathetic reading of ideas with which it disagrees? Does it consider a sufficient range of sources?
- (2) Is the work satisfactory as an *analytical* exercise? Does it have a clear thesis or central claim(s)? Is the writing articulated and organized in a persuasive manner? Does it show evidence of the student's voice—i.e., a personal intellectual engagement beyond summary of the author's claims? Does it show an understanding of the questions, themes and ideas pursued in the course? Does it demonstrate insight into the materials beyond class discussion?
- (3) Is the work satisfactory as a *writing* exercise? Is it free of grammatical, spelling and stylistic errors? Does it provide accurate and adequate citations? Does it demonstrate attention to rhetorical stylization?

Ideally, your work should teach me (your reader) something about the materials. At a minimum, it must summarize the materials accurately, clearly and completely and present an analysis (evaluation, critique, application, extension) that demonstrates your personal engagement with the questions, themes and ideas of the course.

Your writing should be ***absolutely free*** of spelling, grammar, stylistic and citation mistakes. You want your reader to engage your ideas; this is not possible if she or he is distracted by your writing. ***If I find myself spending too much time copy-editing your work, I will deduct a letter grade, return it without comment and give you 24 hours to return a re-written version of the assignment. If I find spelling errors that could have been caught by spell-check, I will give the paper a U and return it without comment.*** Religious studies students must follow Turabian's *Manual of Style*, 7th ed., for questions of grammar, style and citation form. English students may use the *MLA Manual of Style*, 7th ed., but must indicate which of these two style manuals they will be using on their first assignment and then follow it for the remainder of the course.

Two style rules that will apply to assignments for this course:

- (1) Do not use "you" in formal writing.
Incorrect: "This passage in Bataille makes you feel confused and disoriented."
Correct: "This passage in Bataille makes the reader feel confused and disoriented."
- (2) Do not use contractions in formal writing.

You should privilege depth over breadth in your writing. It is better to address a small point, and do it well, than to try something grand, and do it superficially. There is no expectation, in this class or in the world, that you be exhaustive. Instead, you need to learn to frame a question well, accurately represent the ideas of others, explain your own thinking clearly and completely, provide sufficient detail to flesh out generalizations, show some kind of mastery over the topic(s) on which you choose to write, and write in an engaging, rhetorically sensitive manner.

Remember, you will not be in the room with your reader: what you put on the page must be a clear, complete and precise statement of your ideas.

Because this is a course about the nature and function of literary language, you should try to consider issues beyond proofreading and clarity of expression. You should think about rhetoric, form and style. You should be attentive to how you organize an argument, how you begin and end an essay, what kind of language you use (from word choice to examples to quotations to metaphors), and the variation in length and complexity of your sentences and paragraphs. While I do not expect you to imitate the style of any of the authors we read, you should take cues from them with regard to how form, style and rhetoric can serve your interests as an author.

Finally, you should familiarize yourself with and conform your conduct to the University's Code of Student Academic Integrity. Plagiarism on any assignment will result in a failing grade for the course.

GRADE DESCRIPTIONS

The range of grades used in graduate courses at UNC Charlotte is A (commendable), B (satisfactory), C (marginal), and U (unsatisfactory). Under exceptional circumstances, a grade of I (incomplete) can be assigned at my discretion.

- A** Exceptional work that distinguishes you from your peers and evinces exhaustive preparation and superior performance in every aspect of the assignment. Careful, accurate, complete, sympathetic interpretation of the text(s). General observations supported by specific detail from the text(s) under analysis. Contains a strong and clear thesis. Contributes something particularly interesting, unique or creative above and beyond class discussion. Clear and well-organized writing free of grammatical, spelling and stylistic errors. *At the graduate level, an A indicates that you have the analytical and writing skills that you need to succeed in graduate school. These skills show that you are capable of engaging difficult concepts, generating questions and ideas, and mastering the mechanics of presenting your ideas clearly and cleanly.*
- B** Strong work. Attentive to the most significant details of the text(s). Conversant with the themes, questions and issues of the course. Has an obvious main point. Presents a reasonable interpretation supported by sufficient evidence. Clear and well-organized writing free of serious grammatical, spelling and stylistic errors. *At the graduate level, a B indicates that you are competent, but that your analytical and writing skills still need refinement. It is a warning that you have areas where you must improve in order to succeed. Most A-level undergraduate work is B-level graduate work.*
- C** Inadequate work. Failure to understand the text(s) on significant points, or an incomplete explanation of them. Failure to comprehend the themes, questions and issues of the course. Unclear or unsupported thesis. Analysis at too general a level. Writing unclear, unstructured or with numerous grammatical, spelling and stylistic errors. Failure to improve in analytic precision or clarity of expression over previous assignments. *At the graduate level, a C indicates that you lack certain skills that are essential to success. It is the equivalent of a D or F in undergraduate study.*
- U** Unacceptable work. Analysis proceeds at a very general level. Analysis gets significant details wrong or ignores issues that are inconsistent with the paper's main point. Discussion fails to engage course materials. Significant problems with the clarity or organization of the writing. Significant issues with grammar, spelling or style. *A U indicates that your analytical and writing skills are seriously deficient and that success in graduate school is likely beyond your grasp.*

One final grade of C automatically generates a written warning from the Dean of the Graduate School and may prevent you from pursuing further graduate work; a second C is sufficient grounds for your permanent dismissal from the program.

The receipt of a U in any single graduate course while at UNC Charlotte results in an immediate academic suspension, which effectively ends your graduate career at this institution.

If you come to class, participate in discussion, work hard on your assignments and improve over the course of the semester, I will take that into consideration when translating your individual assignment grades into a course grade.