

Course Preface

For the next fifteen weeks you'll be reading and responding in writing to a wide range of literature. To ease you into the course, I've included in this packet materials that should assist your understanding of the readings, clarify the writing assignments, and lend a helping hand (or a shoulder to cry on) as you progress towards becoming a full-fledged, Grade-A, Government Inspected, no-holds-barred literary critic/thinker; at a more basic level, this packet should help you get the most out of the class – and leave it with a smile.

Reading

Although most people think only of books when they hear “reading,” the activity takes many different forms. You read a movie, making connections between the girl in the red dress and the man with the revolver who appears in the car chase scene; you read the road from behind the wheel of your car, carefully avoiding skunks, pieces of wooden pallets, and orange cones; you read a teacher's demeanor on the first day of class wondering, “Is she a hard grader?” “Can I catch up on my sleep in this class?” All of these kinds of reading involve a studied, concentrated look at a particular event, landscape, or person in an effort to extract some kind of meaning. I bring up these different forms of readings only to show that even if you aren't used to reading books, you're used to reading. For this course, you'll use these same skills and apply them to the written word.

Now of course you're thinking “Like, I already know how to read – thanks.” But the kind of close, analytical reading required to fully appreciate literature (and to fully appreciate any written work) is a skill that's faded in our media saturated age. Consider your computer for instance. Years ago we had to memorize a few text-based DOS commands such as COPY, MOVE, etc to make our computers work. Now? Move the mouse and point to a . . . picture. And think of the internet. What draws you to a web page – the eye-candy graphics or the rich and in-depth text which stimulates deep thought? I thought so. . . In fact, reading any text over a screen length online is a cumbersome chore entailing much eye squinting and scrolling down of screens.

This course is designed to reacquaint you with the rigors and rewards of reading. First, the rigors. Reading closely means paying attention to not only the plot – or what happens in a story – it means paying even more attention to *why* it happened. This digging deeper, paying attention not just to the surface of the story but the implications behind a word or phrase – what is suggested by the story opening at midnight – and ending at dawn? Why are colors associated with flames so prominent? Why a cathedral and not a castle? – is what reading well is all about. And this is where the rewards come in. As you learn to attune your eye/ear to the more subtle gradations of thought and feeling in literature, you're learning to look more closely at the world around you – and I don't only mean the printed word. The kind of reading that this class fosters will be used both as you interpret a marketing report in your career as Assistant VP to the VP for Marketing at Widget© Inc., and as you see through the spin of a political advertisement that presents a candidate whose father and grandfather were both members of the senate (and whose father was a president) yet who proclaims that he's “not from Warshington.”

As the two examples above suggest, we're still awash in a sea of words, and the skills you'll learn in this class – paying attention to the connotations of words, an awareness of how irony and point of view can affect meaning, understanding how figurative language can express complex and abstract ideas – will give you that edge you need to succeed in your careers – and be the life of the party. More importantly, learning to read analytically gives shape to that endeavor we call life. It clarifies the world around us, providing the language (and thus the thinking) we need to move from grunting, mewling automatons ruled by the latest marketing gimmick beamed to us via satellite from WeOwnTheWorld Inc., to thoughtful, skeptical, reasoning – and above all *alive and kicking* individuals. That “kick” is important because modern life, with its consumerist, let's-satisfy-my-basic-urges-first attitude, results in complacency and apathy. Reading allows you to get to the essentials of life, to cut through the mental static of the McJobs you suffer through to pay your car note, the fleeting satisfaction of the great shoes you bought at Nine West, and the empty sensations of screaming at the villain of the month on the idiot

box, be it the behemoth with makeup on WWF, or the latest ruler of a small nation that dares to disagree with us. Reading allows us to, as Jay Pirani suggests, swing “a lantern ahead of us in the fog of our lives.” I’ll supply the lantern – great literature – you bring the matches (more prosaically known as your brain and your interest).

My approach to teaching literature is an extension of my approach to reading. First, I read and enjoy the work, willingly suspending disbelief and entering the world created by the author. Later, and on a more analytical basis, I work at a basic understanding of the mechanics – plot, character, point of view, theme, symbolism – but what I always come back to is the vision of life offered by the text. Just what are the prominent features of this fictive world, and how does it comment on or reflect the human condition? Thus, you’ll find me continually turning to examples from everyday life – in other words, from history, psychology, anthropology, art, sociology, etc. – to explain the beauty, relevance, or meaning of a particular text.

On a different note, we – students of literature (and for the rest of the semester, you’re included in this definition) – look at these works closely because any text worth reading closely is worth the same intellectual effort that goes into any critical examination of a topic. Looking for connections and meanings in a given work of literature is similar to figuring out the causes of the Civil War – or the effects of El Niño on world climate. By that I mean it is an intellectual exercise designed to get you to closely examine one particular aspect of life, and then derive some solace, moral, or understanding of the vast and complex web of human relations we call life. Thus the kind of thoughtful, reflective reading this course demands is meant to reshape the way you perceive the world around you, allow you to glean new insights into the workings of shetl life in eastern Europe, the emotional detachment of a worker in late twentieth century America, and the life of a despondent college student in medieval Denmark (or is it Elizabethan England?).

To foster this kind of attentive reading, you should read each assignment at least twice: if you’re like me, the first time you read to see what happens and the second time around, you read to see *why* it happened. Remember, as well, to read with a pen or pencil in hand and mark up your book copiously. Jot down questions to yourself, note where odd lines of dialogue or description occur, argue with the author, or “nod” your head in agreement. While simply highlighting the text may work with a biology textbook, in literature what you say back to the text is just as important as what the writer says. This “talking back” to the text is a sure sign that you’re reading attentively – which is the way you should be reading for this course.

Writing

Moving from reading to writing (this course is, after all, the second half of the writing requirement), I have some general remarks on essays. In formal writing, particularly in essays, you have to organize your thoughts and communicate them clearly to the reader. This means that instead of just pouring everything you know about a story or poem or play into your essay or body paragraph and saying “there – that oughta’ do it,” you have to form your thoughts into an organized piece of writing. Granted, in the early stage of writing, you do need to let it all out – put all of your thoughts down on paper, whether in lists, diagrams, or short paragraphs. But as you begin crafting your essay, you need to look over all of your brilliant insights and say “I like the quote about the lady as a cash register watcher, but it doesn’t fit in my argument” – and then take it out..

As you draft your essay, keep in mind two common maladies in writing about literature: quote bloat and development deficit. To cure quote bloat, remember that it’s not the number or length of quotes that makes a good essay – it’s how well you explain them. Two short quotes in a paragraph, explained in detail, are better than four long ones that are merely glossed over. The remedy for development deficit is to get the reader to “see” and “read” a text the way you do. Without letting them get inside your head – in other words, writing your thinking down – the reader will be blind: and you’re not writing in Braille. While you may think “any blockhead can see what I mean by this quote,” you need to realize that I am the mother of all blockheads. Your job is to show the reader that *you* know how a particular quote – which is merely a string of words – supports your argument. Even something as patently obvious as the color red

suggesting anger needs to be clarified. Instead of anger, red could mean love. So you must explain how, in general, red is associated with anger – or love. For instance, as a reader, every time I come across a quote in an essay I ask myself “Now how does this support the topic sentence?” or “Hmmm, why this quote? What’s its connection to the rest of the paragraph?” The key is to anticipate and answer questions an ignorant reader may have with your thinking on a particular literary work. And since I cannot read your mind, I come to your essay as an ignorant reader: it's your job to make it as easy as possible for me to follow your thinking.

We’ll be working together on your out-of-class essays, and while I encourage you to let others read and offer suggestions on your work, I strongly suggest you use myself, a classmate, or a tutor from the Writing Skills Workshop (R144) as your primary readers/reviewers. If you use anyone else, be sure that they do not correct your essay; let them read it and ask you questions about words, grammar, focus, but under no circumstances should you let them write out corrections: that’s your job. In any case, be sure to save all drafts – especially those with questions from other readers.

That said, be prepared to enjoy the class: we’ll be reading some great stories and having some good conversations about them. See you in class.