

Introduction to Literary Theory

COLT 302, Class #22008R, Fall 2009, Mon & Wed 2-3:20, THH 118



Richard Williams Thomas, "Still Life with Skull, Open Book with Glasses and Hourglass/The Sands of Time," 1850-1852.

This class will introduce students to ways of reflecting conceptually and critically about “literature” itself. What is literature? What is the “literary”? How has “literature” emerged historically? What may be specific to literature that is not shared by other uses of language? We will consider influential articulations of literature with critical reflection on the literary; we will read intensively speculative, philosophical, aesthetic, analytical, theoretical works alongside, with, through, and by means of, literary texts—novellas, poems, short stories. We will read critical and speculative work by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Julia Kristeva, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, Michel Foucault, Jean-Luc Nancy, Sigmund Freud, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Rancière, Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida, in conjunction with literary texts by Charles Baudelaire, Gerard de Nerval, Harryette Mullen, Henry James, Herman Melville, and Maurice Blanchot.

The course will consist of 6 sections, each 2 to 3 weeks long. The first section will consider two readings of two different poems—Claude Lévi-Strauss on Charles Baudelaire’s “Les chats” (“The Cats”) with Julia Kristeva on Gerard de Nerval’s “El Desdichado” (“The Disinherited”) (2 weeks). We will then familiarize ourselves with terms and approaches suggested by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle in *Literary Criticism and Theory* (3 weeks), along with poems by Harryette Mullen (*Sleeping with the Dictionary*). We will then read selections from Michel Foucault (“Fantasia of the Library”, “What Is an Author?” and excerpts from *The Order of Things*) to ask about the institution of literature and the historical emergence of the idea of literature (2 weeks). We will then read Sigmund Freud’s essay, “The Uncanny” with E.T.A. Hoffmann’s story, *The Sandman* and essays by Hélène Cixous (3 weeks). We will then read Jacques Rancière’s *The Flesh of Words*, along with essays by Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze on Herman Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener* (3 weeks) and finish with Jacques Derrida’s “Demeure: Fiction and Testimony” and Maurice Blanchot’s short story “The Instant of My Death” (2 weeks).

Students will write 5 short papers (each of some 3-4 pages, worth 15% each) in the course of the semester, each one exploring issues raised in a particular section. There will be a final paper (8-10 pages long, worth 20%) in which students will extend and consolidate their thinking about the issues we have examined. (The other 5% of the final grade will be based on class participation.)

This is a required course for all Tracks of the Comparative Literature Major and Minor.

Professor Michael du Plessis

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