

English 130 “Reading Fiction”

Fall 2007 syllabus
time: 9:40—10:50 am
place: Quad 344

Dr. Steven Thomas

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office hours:
even days: 2:15—3 pm,
odd days: 1:15—2 pm,
and by appointment

READING FICTION

In a sense, every time we read, we are being detectives, trying to figure out what things mean, why things are the way they are, and whether things are really what they appear to be -- and we are reading all the time, not just when we open a novel or a newspaper, but also when we "read" a stranger's facial expression or "read" the geography of a new place. And so, being a good reader is always somewhat like being a good detective, the final third of this class will focus on detective stories, and we will see if we can read other kinds of fiction the same way.

But before that, we will ask three of the most basic, yet still hard to answer, questions: why fiction? what kinds of fiction are there? and how does fiction work? To figure out answers to these questions, we will read two novels, many short stories, and a few essays. In the first unit, I want us to think about what the practically and socially useful things that fiction can do that other kinds of writing or communication can not do. In the second unit, we will study the historical developments of fiction, different forms and genres, and a vocabulary for talking about literature. Finally, in the third unit, we will focus on the genre of the detective story.

TEXTS IN BOOKSTORE:

Great American Short Stories, edited by Paul Negri
Devil in a Blue Dress, by Walter Mosley

OTHER TEXTS:

on-line, linked to course website

COURSE WEBSITE:

<http://www.employees.csbsju.edu/swthomas/engl130.htm>

EXPECTATIONS AND POLICIES:

I have intentionally not assigned a lot of reading, and therefore I do expect you to read all of it. Come to class prepared to actively discuss the readings. In these discussions, I expect you to engage not only the reading and me, but also your classmates, in a mature and respectful manner.

I expect you to come to class each day, and if you miss more than three days or are chronically late for class, I will consider lowering your overall grade.

I expect you to turn the assignments in on time. Plan on discussing your essays with your classmates on the days that they are due. Completing work late will adversely affect the classroom activity.

I expect you to plan ahead, to be yourself responsible for keeping up, and to keep me informed of any personal issues that will affect your performance in the course.

EVALUATION:

- Attendance and participation – 10%
- “My Generation” essay – 10%
- Critical Essay – 20%
- Mid-Term – 30%
- Final Essay – 30%

ASSIGNMENTS:**1. “My Generation” Essay (1-2 pages)**

Imagine that you are going to write a short story or novel about your generation. What is unique about your generation? What issues does it face? Does it face them honestly? How would you explain your generation to your parents’ or grandparents’ generation? To someone from another planet?

In this essay, I don’t want you to write a story. What I want you to do is explain what you would write about, why, and what approach you would take. In other words, how do you think you would tell the story if you were to write it?

2. Critical Essay (2-3 pages)

In this essay, pretend that you are a critic writing a review of *Happyland* for a magazine. I expect you to have a thesis and argue your thesis with evidence from the text. I also expect you to use one or more of the other assigned readings to help you with your critical perspective on the novel.

Look at a recent issue of *Harper’s*, *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *Atlantic Monthly*, or *NY Times Book Review* for examples of what book reviews look like.

3. Re-Vision (3-4 pages)

The novel *Happyland* is written in the third-person. Re-write one of its chapters (just one of them) in the first person from the point of view of one its characters.

4. Mid-Term

The exam will ask you to write short (one paragraph) answers to questions. Each question will be nothing more than a passage from one of the stories or novels and a single term (e.g., metaphor or realism). To answer the question, you will do three things all at once: define the particular term, identify what story or novel the passage comes from, and use the term to analyze the passage.

5. Final Paper (4-6 pages)

Choose three texts from Unit Three; compare and contrast how they diagnose society. In your discussion, also bring in at least one text from each of the previous units.

CALENDAR

UNIT ONE – WHY FICTION?

| Day | Reading | Goings On |
|--------------|---|---|
| Aug 31 (Th) | | intro's |
| Sept 3 (M) | George Orwell, "Why I Write" Encyclopedia Britannica "George Orwell" | agree or disagree with Orwell |
| Sept 5 (W) | Robert Lennon, <i>Happyland</i> , part one | |
| Sept 7 (F) | <i>Happyland</i> , part two Wikipedia "Satire" | discuss satire |
| Sept 11 (T) | <i>Happyland</i> , part three Mel Gussow, "Wilsonian Vision of Ibsen" Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken" | discuss the role of imagination in real life |
| Sept 13 (Th) | <i>Happyland</i> , part four Nancy Geyer, "There Is No Happyland" | |
| Sept 17 (M) | Marilynne Robinson, "Facing Reality" Barry Glassner, "Introduction," <i>The Culture of Fear</i> recommended: the rest of <i>The Culture of Fear</i> | fiction and truth |
| Sept 19 (W) | Glassner, "Black Men" from <i>Culture of Fear</i> Jeff Chang, "Prelude" to <i>Can't Stop, Won't Stop</i> | discuss "My Generation" essay |
| Sept 21 (F) | | Due: "My Generation" Essay (1-2 pgs) |
| Sept. 25 (T) | Jonathan Swift, "Modest Proposal" South Park, "American History" Wikipedia, Reality TV and its parodies | parody and truth |
| Sept. 26 (W) | HERITAGE DAY Marilynne Robinson speaking | |
| Sept. 28 (F) | | Due: Critical Essay (2-3 pgs) |

UNIT TWO – HISTORY, FORM, AND ARGUMENT

| Day | Reading | Goings On |
|-------------|--|---|
| Sept 28 (F) | Ryunosuke Akutagawa, “In a Grove” and “Rashomon” Herman Melville, “Bartleby” (GASS)* Wikipedia “Point of View (literature)” * GASS = <i>Great American Short Stories</i> | discuss point of view discuss “Re-Vision” assignment |
| Oct 2 (T) | Akira Kurosawa, <i>Rashomon</i> (movie) Wikipedia “Point of View Shot” | technology and “point of view” |
| Oct 4 (Th) | | Due: Re-Vision (2-4 pages) |
| Oct 8 (M) | Aesop, “The Ant and the Grasshopper” and “The Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing” Harriet Beecher Stowe, “The Freeman’s Dream: a Parable” Washington Irving, “Traits of Indian Character” and “Philip of Pokonoket” Richard Wright, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” | discuss genre: fable, parable, sketch, (metaphor, allegory) |
| Oct 10 (W) | Edgar Allen Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” (GASS) Charles Chesnuut, “The Goophered Grapevine” (GASS) | more genre: the tale and the short story |
| Oct 11-12 | FREE | DAYS |
| Oct 16 (T) | Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Minister’s Black Veil” Sherwood Anderson, “The Egg” (GASS) | meta-allegory |
| Oct 18 (Th) | Mary Wilkins Freeman, “A New England Nun” (GASS) Kate Chopin, “A Pair of Silk Stockings” (GASS) Kenneth Burke and/or Hayden White on “The Four Master Tropes” | stories as diagnostic anatomies – metonymy, synecdoche, irony, and symptom |
| Oct 22 (M) | Samuel Johnson, “The New Realistic Novel” and “Literary Imitation” Mark Twain “How to Tell a Story” and “Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offences” recommended: <i>Last of the Mohicans</i> (movie) | lecture on the history of fiction and on romanticism, realism, naturalism, modernism, and postmodernism |
| Oct 24 (W) | Introduction to Horatio Alger, Jr. Twain, “Good Little Boy” and “Bad Little Boy” | realism through parody |
| Oct 26 (F) | | free study day :-) |

| Day | Reading | Goings On |
|-------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Oct 30 (T) | Bierce, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (GASS) Jack London, "To Build a Fire" (GASS) Henry James, "The Real Thing" (GASS) recommended: Twain "Private History..." (GASS) | irony and the sense of the real |
| Nov 1 (Th) | Bret Harte "The Luck of Roaring Camp" (GASS)Ernest Hemmingway "The Killers" (GASS) | the sentiment of the real |
| Nov 5 (M) | Gertrude Stein, <i>The World Is Round</i> (within Stein's <i>Writings</i> , on reserve in both CSB and SJU libraries) | modernism |
| Nov 7 (W) | Ursula Le Guin "Texts", "She Unnames Them" and "Schrodinger's Cat" | postmodernism |
| Nov 9 (F) | | review day |
| Nov. 13 (T) | | Mid-Term Exam |

UNIT THREE – THE SOCIAL SYMPTOM AND THE DETECTION OF MEANING

| Day | Readings | Going's On |
|-------------|--|--|
| Nov 15 (Th) | Edger Allen Poe, “The Purloined Letter” G. K. Chesterton, “The Wrong Shape” | the detective story and the reading of signs |
| Nov 19 (M) | Charlotte Perkins Gilman “The Yellow Wallpaper” (GASS) and “Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper” | signs and the social symptom |
| Nov 21-23 | THANKS- | GIVING |
| Nov 26 (M) | <i>The Big Sleep</i> (movie) Wikipedia “noir fiction” and “film noir” from Pauline Kael’s <i>Kiss Kiss Bang Bang</i> | noir |
| Nov 28 (W) | Walter Mosley, <i>Devil in a Blue Dress</i> Raymond Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder” | |
| Nov 30 (F) | <i>Devil in a Blue Dress</i> | |
| Dec 4 (T) | <i>Devil in a Blue Dress</i> | noir and the social symptom |
| Dec 6 (Th) | F. Scott Fitzgerald “Bernice Bobs Her Hair” (GASS) | diagnosing society |
| Dec 10 (M) | Willa Cather, “Paul’s Case” (GASS) recommended: Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown” (GASS) | reading signs or imagining significance |
| Dec 12 (W) | Sarah Orne Jewett “A White Heron” (GASS) Doreen Baingana “Tropical Fish” | re-imagining the self |
| Dec 14 (F) | | Workshop Final Essay |