

<p style="text-align: center;">Philosophy of Literature Syllabus (W3852) David Sidorsky Spring 2012</p>

Day/Time: MW 1:10pm-2:25pm
Location: 602 Hamilton Hall

A survey of five topics of perennial discussion in the philosophical commentary on works of literature.

The required readings for the course have been assembled in the course reader. The course reader can be purchased at the *Village Copier* located on the west side of Broadway between 111th and 112th St.

The requirements for the course, that is, the grading procedure, have not yet been set as of the printing of this syllabus. The decision on these procedures will be made in consultation with the class. Customarily grading has been based on a midterm exam and a final exam.

Introductory Lecture

The scope and significance of philosophical commentary on literature.

Topic I: The relationship between literature and truth

1. Plato's argument contra Ion that art does not provide knowledge; the contrary hypothesis of the magnet of Heracles. It is relevant for the class discussion of literature and truth that the Platonic thesis in the *Ion* that can be described as the complete separation of the cognitive from the emotive has also been formulated in twentieth-century literary criticism by I.A. Richards under the influence of Logical Positivism.

Required reading: **Plato**, *Ion*.

2. "The war between philosophy and poetry": the Platonic criticism of Homer and the poets on grounds of truth.

Required reading: **Plato**, *Republic*, selections from Books II and III.

3. Plato's ontological criticism on mimetic art in the *Republic*. A corollary question raised by Book X of the *Republic* is the possibility and legitimacy of non-representational art.

Required reading: **Plato**, *Republic*, Book X to 608c.

4. In contrast to the Platonic criticism of art as poetry as occupying the lower rungs of reality, Plato, on a different occasion, argues that art and poetry

provide a ladder to the higher rungs of reality. One formulation of this ladder is found in parts of the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*. An alternative and concise formulation of Platonism in art is available in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

The reader contains for required reading a selected passage from the **Plato's** *Phaedrus* as well as **Keats's** "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

5. Aristotle's *Poetics* suggests an alternative approach according to which Platonic mimesis is replaced by Aristotelian catharsis. Accordingly, the issue of artistic truth can be reformulated in terms of the issue of whether and how persons learn from experiencing works of art.

Required reading: Selections from **Aristotle's** *Poetics*.

6. I.A. Richards in *Principles of Literary Criticism* argued for the dichotomy between cognitive statements and emotive expressions. In the chapter "Truth and Revelation Theories," Richards listed a number of conventional formulations of arts for exposure in the light of critical examination.

Required reading: **Richards'** chapter "Truth and Revelation Theories."

7. Graham Hough in a chapter on "Poetry and Truth" in his *An Essay on Criticism* developed his own argument against I.A. Richards' dichotomy between cognitive statements as verifiable assertions and non-cognitive statements as "expressions of emotive attitude" and his own thesis about the contextual truth of literature.

Required reading: **Graham Hough**, "Poetry and Truth."

Topic II. Theories of interpretation of literary writing.

1. The recognition of levels of meaning in a text; class discussion of examples of literal and figurative meaning. The possibilities of metaphor: Dante on the levels of meaning: biblical exegesis and secular poetry; on the use of symbols and on allegory. Boccaccio on theology as poetry.

Required reading: selections from **Wimsatt and Brooks**, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*.

2. The merging of biblical interpretation with Hellenism: Philo's reading of Plato into Genesis and Maimonides' reading of Aristotle into Genesis.

Required reading: selections from **Maimonides**, *The Guide of the Perplexed*.

3. The criterion of authorial intention in Modernism and the relevance of literary biography versus semiotic analysis. The Course Reader contains a classic background paper, "**The Intentional Fallacy**" by Wimsatt and Beardsley, and

although it is not intended that the student master this paper because of its multiple allusions, it is included since it is useful for its analysis of the topic.

4. The debate over the limits of literary interpretation.

(a) Deconstruction as presented in **Jacques Derrida**'s essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." This paper is provided for background since the density of the writing renders it, in the opinion of the instructor, not written clearly enough as to be readable. It is included as a prime example of the way in which the thesis of deconstruction was developed.

(b) The deconstruction of deconstruction in **Cedric Watts**: "Bottom's Children: The Fallacies of Structuralist, Post-structuralist and Deconstructionist Literary Theory." This essay is reprinted from Laurence Lerner: *Reconstructing Literature*.

5. Mythic interpretation. Northrop Frye in the *Anatomy of Criticism* provided multiple ways for interpreting works of literature as representations of mythical patterns. For reasons of time, the course does not explore many of Frye's modes and mechanisms of interpreting works of art. The reader does contain a selection from the *Anatomy of Criticism* in which Frye indicates the four different mythic patterns that distinguish comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony or satire.

Required reading: selections from **Northrop Frye**'s *Anatomy of Criticism*.

Topic III. The question of universality or pluralism of works of literature: reflections in the models of classicism and romanticism.

1. The case for classicism

(a) Alexander Pope's argument in "Essay on Criticism."

(b) The argument for universalism has been formulated by Wimsatt and Brooks in their chapter on "The Neo-Classic Universal: Samuel Johnson."

Required reading: selections from **Alexander Pope**'s "Essay on Criticism" and selection from **Wimsatt and Brooks**' chapter "The Neo-Classic Universal: Samuel Johnson."

2. Romanticism and the denial of classical archetypes.

(a) C.M. Bowra: *The Romantic Imagination* contrasted with Classical archetypes from C.M. Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination*, Chapter I.

(b) Romantic Poetry in England: Two Examples. Coleridge, "Kubla Kahn" and Tennyson, "The Lady of Shallott."

(c) Some German theories of Romanticism including Herder's views on poetry. Wimsatt and Brooks: *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, selections from, *Chapter 17, "German Ideas."*

Required reading: The reader contains the chapter from **Bowra** on Romanticism, the poems "Kubla Kahn" by **Coleridge** and "The Lady of Shallott" by **Tennyson**, and selections from **Wimsatt and Brooks** on German Romanticism.

3. Classicism and Romanticism as representing two types of experience and knowledge in W.H. Auden's lecture: "The Stone and the Shell." The selection in the Course Reader is the second chapter, titled "The Stone and the Shell" of W.H. Auden: *The Enchafed Flood*. An interesting review of the compatibility of romanticism and science that provides a foil to the Auden essay is Algis Valiunas, essay review on the *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*.

Required Reading: the course reader contains chapter two from **W.H. Auden's** "Stone and the Shell," *The Enchafed Flood*, as well as the review by **Algis Valiunas** of Richard Holmes's *The Age of Wonder*.

4. Classicism within modernism and the claims of tradition; T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

Required reading: the course reader contains **T.S. Eliot's** "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

Topic IV. Theories of the genesis of literature.

1. The Marxist theory of literary genesis and the question of the genetic fallacy. The Marxist thesis on the place of political commitment in literature. Marxist theories extended this account to argue for the necessity or the importance of political commitment in literature and the arts.

(a) The reader contains a short text from **Marx**, 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. In this preface Marx formulates in a succinct way a far-reaching theory about the production of literature and historical societies.

(b) The most widely accepted Marxist literary critic was **Georg Lukacs**. The course reader contains a chapter "Critical Realism and Socialist Realism" from the book *Realism in Our Time*. Lukacs' literary and critical references go beyond the range of references of the syllabus but his argument is understandable even if some of the details may not be familiar to the student. Accordingly the Lukacs text is provided for background reading rather than a required reading assignment.

2. The Freudian theory of literary genesis and its relevance for the interpretation of a literary work. The Freudian thesis about the use of literature as sublimation and therapy. The reader contains **Freud's** essay "Dostoevsky and Parricide."

3. Existentialist philosophers have advanced theses on the genesis of literary works from particular existential situations including alienation. **Heidegger**'s more general essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" is contained in the reader as well as **Sartre**'s review essay of Camus's novel *The Stranger* or "*the outsider*" (*L'Etranger*)
4. The Modernist theory of the genesis of art and its significance for the semiotic interpretation of a literary work. The course reader contains **E.M. Forster**'s essay "Art for Art's Sake."

Topic V. The relationship between literature and morality.

1. One general question that is posed to the class is whether great works of art can serve immoral purposes or whether great works of literature inevitably serve some kind of enlightenment or moral purpose.
2. Romanticism, moral pluralism, and the question of counterculture. The course reader includes a polemical essay "Romantic Morality: The Real" by **Irving Babbitt** from *Rousseau and Romanticism*.
3. Empirical issues on the morality of art that are derived from the experience of art and literature in totalitarian cultures of the twentieth century. The reader contains a review titled "Art and Agitprop" by **Michael J. Lewis** of Steven Heller's *Iron Fists: Branding the 20th-century Totalitarian State* which is an illustrated study of works of art under Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin.
4. The moral argument of Platonic censorship and Aristotelian catharsis revisited in light of Marxist, Freudian, and totalitarian interpretations of literature.
5. Modernism and morality. The issue of the replacement of a moral or traditional covenant by a covenant of modernism in art or literature. As background for the discussion of Modernism and Morality, I have included in the reader three essays of my own from *New Literary History* which involve different aspects of the morality of modernism. The first is "Modernism and the Emancipation of Literature from Morality: Teleology and Vocation in Joyce, Proust and Ford-Madox Ford." The second is "The Historical Novel as the Denial of History: from Nestor via the Vico Road to the Commodus Vicus of Recirculation." The third is: "The Uses of the Philosophy of G.E. Moore in the Works of E.M. Forster."
6. Concluding lecture-discussion: the relationship between literature and philosophy.