

LT143: Close Reading, Ethics, and the Novel

Instructor: James Harker j.harker@berlin.bard.edu

Office Hours: Tuesdays, 13:00-15:00

Course Times: Mondays and Wednesdays, 17:30-19:00

Fall Term 2019

Course Description

In an era when the study of the humanities is under threat and the very activity of reading is seemingly in decline, a great many arguments have been put forth that literature is not just beneficial, it is ethical. But are these claims true? And where do they come from? This course is structured around three related questions and the dominant arguments that seek to answer them. Focusing on fiction, we will consider how we should read, and the hypothesis that "close reading" enhances fundamental skills in critical thinking. In addition to learning about what "close reading" is (or was) we will look at recent alternatives including "distant reading" and "surface reading." Finally, we will ask why we read and consider the "empathy hypothesis," which suggests that reading fiction improves our ability to appreciate the different experiences of others. Our exploration of the ethical claim for fiction will be complemented by reading novels that provoke striking ethical questions for both their protagonists and their readers: Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section III Academic Misconduct.

<u>Attendance</u>

Attendance at all sessions of the course is required. After two absences for any reason (including minor health issues, unavoidable travel, appointments, etc.), the participation grade will be lowered one step (i.e. from A- to B+) per absence.

In accordance with the Student Handbook, a failing grade for the course will be given if absences reach 30% of the course meetings.

Arriving late to class or not bringing the reading to class will count as ½ of an absence.

See the Student Handbook regarding Leave of Absence policies and what to do in the event of long-term medical leaves.



Policy on Late Submission of Papers

According to the Student Handbook: Essays that are up to 24 hours late will be downgraded one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline and cannot receive a grade of higher than C. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment.

Grade Breakdown

Essay One:	1750 words	25%
Essay Two:	1750 words	25%
Essay Three:	1750 words	25%
Participation:		25%

Schedule

The Crisis of Reading

Week 1: Monday, Sept 2 Introduction and various articles on the decline of reading

Close Reading 1: New Criticism

Week 1: Wednesday, Sept 4 John Crowe Ransom. "Criticism, Inc."

Terry Eagleton. "The Rise of English"

Aestheticism and the Novel

Week 2: Monday, Sept 9 Oscar Wilde. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (chapters 1-5)

Week 2: Wednesday, Sept 11 Oscar Wilde. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (chapters 6-10)

Week 3: Monday, Sept 16 Oscar Wilde. The Picture of Dorian Gray (chapters 11-15)

Week 3: Wednesday, Sept 18 Oscar Wilde. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (chapters 16-20)

Close Reading 2: Reading, Close Reading, Ethics

Week 4: Monday, Sept 23 Allan Bloom. "Preface," "Introduction," "The Student and the

University." The Closing of the American Mind

Jane Gallop. "The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters"

Lionel Trilling. "Reality in America" and "The Meaning of a Week 4: Wednesday, Sept 25

Literary Idea," The Liberal Imagination

Week 5: Monday, Sept 30 Wayne Booth. "Why Ethical Criticism Can Never Be Simple"



Week 5: Wednesday, Oct 2 Martha Nussbaum. "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of

Ethical Criticism"

Richard Posner. "Against Ethical Criticism"

Week 5: Friday, October 4 Essay 1 Due

Conrad's Heart of Darkness, A Case Study

Week 6: Monday, Oct 7 Joseph Conrad. Heart of Darkness

Week 6: Wednesday, Oct 9 Joseph Conrad. Heart of Darkness

Chinua Achebe. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart

of Darkness."

Week 7: Monday, Oct 14 Edward Said. "Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories."

Culture and Imperialism

Peter Brooks. "An Unreadable Report: Conrad's Heart of

Darkness."

Alternatives to Close Reading: Distant Reading and Surface Reading

Week 7: Wednesday, Oct 16 Franco Moretti. "Conjectures on World Literature."

Jonathan Arac. "Anglo-Globalism"

Week 8: Monday, Oct 21 Franco Moretti. "More Conjectures on World Literature"

Susan Sontag. "Against Interpretation"

Week 8: Wednesday, Oct 23 Stanley Fish. "Is There a Text in this Class?"

Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An

Introduction"

FALL BREAK

Empathy

Week 9: Monday, Nov 4 Suzanne Keen. "Contemporary Perspectives on

Empathy" and "The Literary Career of Empathy,"

Empathy and the Novel

Week 9: Wednesday, Nov 6 Kathleen Lundeen. "Who Has the Right to Feel? The

Ethics of Literary Empathy"

Week 9: Friday, Nov 8 Essay 2 Due

Toni Morrison's Beloved, A Case Study

Week 10: Monday, Nov 11 Toni Morrison. "Black Matters," *Playing in the Dark:*

Whiteness and the Literary Imagination



Week 10: Wednesday, Nov 13 Toni Morrison. *Beloved*

Week 11: Monday, Nov 18 Toni Morrison. *Beloved*

Week 11: Wednesday, Nov 20 Toni Morrison. *Beloved*

Week 12: Monday, Nov 25 Toni Morrison. *Beloved*

Week 12: Wednesday, Nov 27 James Phelan. "Sethe's Choice: *Beloved* and the

Ethics of Reading"

C. Namwali Serpell. "Adjacency: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*" and "The Vagaries of the New Ethics"

Alternatives to Ethics? Why We Read Literature

Week 13: Monday, Dec 2 Lisa Zunshine. "Attributing Minds," Why We Read

Fiction

Week 13: Wednesday, Dec 4 Brian Boyd, "Evolution and Art," On the Origin of

Stories

Cosmopolitanism and Globalism

Week 14: Monday, Dec 9 Kwame Appiah. "Education for Global Citizenship"

Kwame Appiah. "Imaginary Strangers" and "Cosmopolitan

Contamination," Cosmopolitanism

Week 14: Wednesday, Dec 11 Wrap-Up

Completion Week: Thursday, Dec 19 Essay 3 Due