

# LT143: Close Reading, Ethics, and the Novel

Instructor: James Harker  
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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.

### Attendance

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.



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| Week 5: Wednesday, Oct 2  | Martha Nussbaum. "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism" |
| Week 5: Friday, October 4 | Richard Posner. "Against Ethical Criticism"<br><b>Essay 1 Due</b>          |

### **Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, A Case Study**

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| Week 6: Monday, Oct 7    | Joseph Conrad. <i>Heart of Darkness</i>   |
| Week 6: Wednesday, Oct 9 | Joseph Conrad. <i>Heart of Darkness</i><br>Chinua Achebe. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's <i>Heart of Darkness</i> ."   |
| Week 7: Monday, Oct 14   | Edward Said. "Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories."<br><i>Culture and Imperialism</i><br>Peter Brooks. "An Unreadable Report: Conrad's <i>Heart of Darkness</i> ." |

### **Alternatives to Close Reading: Distant Reading and Surface Reading**

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| Week 7: Wednesday, Oct 16 | Franco Moretti. "Conjectures on World Literature."<br>Jonathan Arac. "Anglo-Globalism"                               |
| Week 8: Monday, Oct 21    | Franco Moretti. "More Conjectures on World Literature"<br>Susan Sontag. "Against Interpretation"                     |
| Week 8: Wednesday, Oct 23 | Stanley Fish. "Is There a Text in this Class?"<br>Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction" |

### **FALL BREAK**

### **Empathy**

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| Week 9: Monday, Nov 4    | Suzanne Keen. "Contemporary Perspectives on Empathy" and "The Literary Career of Empathy,"<br><i>Empathy and the Novel</i> |
| Week 9: Wednesday, Nov 6 | Kathleen Lundeen. "Who Has the Right to Feel? The Ethics of Literary Empathy"  |
| Week 9: Friday, Nov 8    | <b>Essay 2 Due</b>   |

### **Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, A Case Study**

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| Week 10: Monday, Nov 11 | Toni Morrison. "Black Matters," <i>Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination</i> |
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| Week 10: Wednesday, Nov 13 | Toni Morrison. <i>Beloved</i>  |
| Week 11: Monday, Nov 18    | Toni Morrison. <i>Beloved</i>  |
| Week 11: Wednesday, Nov 20 | Toni Morrison. <i>Beloved</i>  |
| Week 12: Monday, Nov 25    | Toni Morrison. <i>Beloved</i>  |
| Week 12: Wednesday, Nov 27 | James Phelan. "Sethe's Choice: <i>Beloved</i> and the Ethics of Reading"<br>C. Namwali Serpell. "Adjacency: Toni Morrison, <i>Beloved</i> " and "The Vagaries of the New Ethics" |

#### Alternatives to Ethics? Why We Read Literature

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| Week 13: Monday, Dec 2    | Lisa Zunshine. "Attributing Minds," <i>Why We Read Fiction</i>   |
| Week 13: Wednesday, Dec 4 | Brian Boyd, "Evolution and Art," <i>On the Origin of Stories</i> |

#### Cosmopolitanism and Globalism

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| Week 14: Monday, Dec 9            | Kwame Appiah. "Education for Global Citizenship"<br>Kwame Appiah. "Imaginary Strangers" and "Cosmopolitan Contamination," <i>Cosmopolitanism</i> |
| Week 14: Wednesday, Dec 11        | Wrap-Up  |
| Completion Week: Thursday, Dec 19 | <b>Essay 3 Due</b>   |